"They're back"

POLTERGEIST II

THE OTHER SIDE

The Freeling family's struggle with spirits begins again....



James Kahn

Based on the Motion Picture Written by Michael Grais & Mark Victor

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IS THERE NO GETTING AWAY FROM IT?

POLTERGEIST II THE OTHER SIDE

The Freeling family has moved to Phoenix, far away from their Cuesta Verde home, which was the site of so much mayhem. But they are haunted again, by . . . An angry voice . . . a swarm of bees . . . slime-oozing beasts . . . a walking dead man.

They seek help to free themselves from the unknown terror that haunts them—and find themselves in an adventure no one ever could have dreamed of.

A FREDDIE FIELDS Presentation of
A VICTOR-GRAIS PRODUCTION

Starring **JOBETH WILLIAMS • CRAIG T. NELSON**

POLTERGEIST II
THE OTHER SIDE

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JULIAN BECK • ZELDA RUBINSTEIN
WILL SAMPSON • GERALDINE FITZGERALD
Music by **JERRY GOLDSMITH**
Director of Photography **ANDREW LASZLO, A.S.C.**
Visual Effects Supervisor **RICHARD EDLUND**
Executive Producer **FREDDIE FIELDS**
Written and Produced by
MICHAEL GRAIS & **MARK VICTOR**
Directed by **BRIAN GIBSON**



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BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK

A Del Rey Book
Published by Ballantine Books

ISBN 0-345-33382-9
First printing June 1986



MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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PROLOGUE

A strong Santa Ana blew over the brush-covered hills and down the canyons of Cuesta Verde, California. The tract houses were spaced so regularly along the roads, they created more of a wind tunnel than a blind, so that the blue pickup truck, on turning into the housing development, seemed almost to be pulled of its own accord—or perhaps with the accord of other, less familiar forces. The man driving the blue pickup was Taylor. A man of less familiar forces.

Taylor was part Hopi, part Anglo, part Navajo—and full brother to the spirits of the earth. Broad in the shoulder, he was yet tall enough to appear wiry; the brown-red weathered furrows of his face seemed sufficiently deep nearly to hide his eyes—just as the dry gullies of the land where he lived sometimes hid flecks of opal, fire agate, or bright obsidian. And such were the colors of his eyes.

But still, a gentle face. A face of many smiles, many sorrows.

In years, he was fifty, though in wisdom twice fifty; and in visions twice that again. It was his custom to wear faded denim, the color of the sky before an autumn rain; and a tan Stetson hat, the color of the same sky clouded by sandstorm; and the feather of an eagle in the hatband; and his black-and-moonlight hair braided in the manner of his people.

He drove the old dented flatbed past a sign that read: WELCOME TO CUESTA VERDE—WHERE DREAMS COME TRUE. This made him smile and nod. *Bad* dreams, he thought, and fingered his medicine bag.

He drove past house after house, scanning the terrain. It looked unremarkable at first, like any suburban housing development. Except, Taylor remarked, there were no people. The houses were abandoned—some windows boarded, some broken. The lawns were overgrown with crabgrass, dandelions, tall weeds, dead gardens. There were no dogs, no tricycles, no cars. FOR SALE signs flapped in the dry desert wind, their paint peeling after a dozen seasons of sun, rain, dust, and neglect.

It was a modern, middle-class ghost town.

For just a moment, Taylor heard music. Dangerous music, spirit music, like the nocturne of madmen, reedy, full of harmonics. He turned up the next street to follow the sound, but it disappeared. Perhaps it was only the Santa Anas gusting. Still, he knew he was

close. Again he touched the amulet he wore around his neck, his rawhide bag of totems.

And then a new sound rose with the dust on the wind: the sound of distant motors, engines in the earth. Taylor drove toward the sound. The sound grew louder.

He reached a cul-de-sac, stopped his truck, took off his hat, got out. The rumbling was palpable; dust swirled thickly all around, almost like smoke, unsettled by the vibrations in the ground, snatched up by the wind.

Taylor walked toward an empty lot between two houses that was surrounded by a high chain-link fence. Lights flashed across his face, bright enough in this twilight to make him squint momentarily—though he was all inside his head now and couldn't have said whether these lights came from the earthly plane or the other.

When he reached the fence he found the gate open, so he walked in. The rumbling was quite loud there, and the air was thick. He removed the red bandanna from his neck and tied it over his mouth to help him breathe. That's when he heard the voice.

"Taylor . . . over here . . ."

He walked over a rise toward the voice. Just at the top the lights washed across his face again, but he saw it was the flashing yellow of a bulldozer just rising from a giant pit in the ground, and the flashlights of two workmen in hardhats walking beside it; in front of them, standing tense and breathless, Tangina Barrons.

She spoke again when his gaze came to rest upon her. "I think we've found the core," she shouted over the noise of the bulldozer. Then, suddenly, the motor stopped, and she spoke more quietly: "This is directly below the old graveyard. Directly below . . ."

She turned and walked back into the pit as if Taylor had been standing there for hours, waiting for her pronouncement—as if he would simply follow her now, without salutation or explanation.

He followed her.

She walked to the back of the excavation, to a section where the bulldozer had actually undercut a thick shelf of earth, creating a sizable niche. Sizable, but not so high that Taylor didn't have to stoop beneath the overhang. This wasn't a problem for Tangina, of course; she was a dwarf.

This stratum of earth above them had once been a graveyard, and after that, the foundations upon which a house had rested. The Freeling house. Bones protruded from it now: a femur, part of a skull. They were the *recent* occupants of the defunct cemetery, though—

hardly fifty years old—and of concern to neither Tangina nor Taylor.

Their concern was the core.

She stopped at a man-size hole in the ground. Here Taylor caught up with her as the two workmen shined their lights down the shaft. Taylor was struck by a sensation of putrescence—almost a smell, but less physical—like an ancient wind rising from this portal. It made Tangina stumble, but she caught herself. Taylor made no move to help her.

One of the workmen descended the ladder into the hole first, to give light and brace the rungs for the others. Tangina followed, then Taylor, then the second hardhat. When she reached the bottom of the small cavern Tangina recoiled—her breathing became labored; she sat down hard. The workmen looked concerned, but Taylor merely observed her, though he could feel with clarity, like her, what the workmen could not.

"There's a presence," she whispered to him, unnecessarily. "Something terrible. Too much power . . ."

Too much for her. Not, perhaps, for him. He bent on one knee beside her, touched her forehead tenderly, tried to make available to her some of his spirit.

She could still only whisper, though. "I can't go on . . ."

It was a hard admission to make, to herself and to her old friend. But hard admissions were her only strength. As if her best armor was to declare her vulnerability out loud. "I'll be okay," she went on. She even smiled vaguely. She certainly didn't want Taylor's focus diverted because he was worrying about her. "It's just too much for me right now," she explained, as if to say that she would soon recover, that he should go on without her.

He nodded, understanding that she would *not* soon recover, that she had been undone by her fear . . . but that he must go on, with or without her, in any case.

He walked down the shallow grade, following the twists of the cavern as it wound deeper into the earth. After a moment's hesitation, the workmen followed him with their lights; and finally, because she was more afraid to be left alone than she was to go deeper toward the Place, Tangina, too, crept along behind. But she felt cold inside, and she had difficulty making her legs move.

A tunnel took them lower still, to the next cave down. The darkness here was dense and all but swallowed the thin flashlight beams. Taylor felt along a damp, slippery wall, his fingers coaxing, seeing, remembering. Here. No, a little farther, and not so high. He lit a match, held it to the stone. The workmen gasped. "Wow," one of them

whispered.

What they saw were Indian drawings on the rock-face. Pictograms, signs, glyphs. One in particular caught Tangina's eye instantly—it seemed to take her breath from her. She couldn't inhale, yet she couldn't look away from it, couldn't let it go. It was a picture of a man with a snake writhing from his mouth. Tangina could almost feel the serpent, as if it were coiled down her own throat, choking off her breath, its belly pressing her tongue, its head squirming between her lips. She gagged. She looked away.

Taylor was on the move again. The cave narrowed and dipped; the path was soon blocked by a dark pool of water. Half out of the water, half embedded in the stuff of the cave wall, was a decayed human skeleton. Taylor began wading into the pool.

"Hey, you don't know how deep that thing is," one of the workmen warned. He was starting to feel a little sick himself. Taylor took the man's flashlight and continued slowly into the pool.

"Why not wait until we pump the water out?" said the second workmen.

"Yeah," the first agreed. Then: "Taylor?"

Taylor was moving, though; he wasn't listening. He had to concentrate on this thing before him, this thing . . .

The water rose to his thigh gradually, then quickly there was a step-off, and he was chest-deep. It was cold. Still he advanced, shining the light before him, shuffling his boots along the slick stone basin. Slowly the water receded as he waded to the opposite shore.

This cavern was lower than the previous one, but the acoustics were different, so the wind that trickled in through the tunnels from the outer world curled around the walls with a pitiful moaning sound.

Bones littered the ground. Human skeletons, arms outstretched, sprawled in agony and isolation or huddled, the skulls of adults nestled with those of children. Unending death lived here; even Taylor had to breathe with care.

He walked to the top of a low rise where a silted-over, mummified corpse seemed to hold court over these ruins. Its face was rotted, grinning, its arms upraised. It seemed almost alive.

Taylor stared but did not go near. Instead, he walked back to the stagnant pool. Tangina was there, and the other two—they had carried her across. She was shivering badly, though. She looked at Taylor and then up at the laughing cadaver upon whom Taylor still had his gaze fixed.

"I have seen him," said Taylor. "In dreams."

Tangina nodded. “I, too.”

Taylor looked up at the ceiling of the cavern—*through* the ceiling, the rock, the earth, the graves, the concrete foundation—to where a house had once stood but stood no more. “Where is the family now?”

The wind rose, not quite to a howl.

“Phoenix,” Tangina told him, for good or ill.

CHAPTER 1

Saturday morning at the Mesa Mall, about twenty miles outside Phoenix, Robbie Freeling stood in front of the Adobe Videotronics Trading Post watching ten television sets through the window. Four were tuned to the Dodger game, three to music video shows, two to a toy company's stop-motion cartoon about space aliens, and one to an old Three Stooges movie. Robbie, now almost thirteen, had been culturally deprived of TV by his parents since the age of nine, so watching four shows on ten sets was about as close to the angels as Robbie was likely to get without dying. He took his chances in public places.

Robbie was like a lot of boys, in most ways: he had braces, which he hated, which sometimes caught his lip and painfully pinched it, and which withered his smile in self-conscious mortification; he liked baseball, didn't like school, understood video games, didn't understand girls.

But there was a uniqueness about Robbie, too, something unshared with his peers. A separateness. A loneliness he seemed to nurture like an old friend. In fact, he didn't really have any friends, except his sister Carol Anne; and she was somehow more than a friend.

They were nearly inseparable, almost as if they were afraid of letting each other out of sight. They played together, read together, did nothing together. They were quite a pair.

Carol Anne emerged now from the adjoining pet store with their mother, Diane. And if Robbie was a little different, Carol Anne was positively irregular. She wore a fey, secret smile most of the time, as if she were a million miles away. The smile faded if someone tried to intrude on it, though; she was afraid of people, by and large. Especially strangers.

She had dreams that frightened her, though she couldn't remember them when she awoke. Her mother had taken her to therapists for years but had finally given up. She simply comforted the child when possible or did some unstructured art therapy with her in the evenings.

Carol Anne liked drawing pictures. Often she did pictures of her dreams, which felt good at times and creepy at other times; she could never predict which it was going to be.

She frequently understood what animals were saying, too—or at least what they wanted. But no one believed her about that any more than they believed her dreams were real, so she usually didn't talk about it.

And finally, though she was going on nine, she looked hardly older than she'd looked over three years before, when her family had left Cuesta Verde to come live with Gramma Jess near Phoenix. In fact, Robbie, too, seemed younger than his years—as if something had happened to arrest his development at a point in time, some suffocation of spirit.

But today was a day of shopping with Mom at the mall. And that was always just pure fun.

Carol Anne was pleading as she exited the pet shop with Diane. "But Mom—I *talked* to the kittens. They *wanna* come home with us."

"I know, sweetheart, but E. Buzz would get upset." E. Buzz was the family dog. "Robbie, come on."

Robbie didn't budge as Carol Anne and Diane moved slowly along the walkway toward the stairwell—this would be his last moment of TV for at least another week, and he wanted to savor it, to make it last.

Mother and daughter continued their debate. "But why?" said Carol Anne.

"Because E. Buzz isn't used to having other pets around," explained Diane. "How would you like it if I brought home a new baby?" She looked around at Robbie, still glued to the window. "Robbie!" she called.

Carol Anne thought about her mother's proposal. "I'd love it, Mom," she replied, beaming.

"Robbie—we're going!" Diane raised her voice again. Then, to Carol Anne: "We'll ask your dad."

This was an unexpected concession. "Wow, you really think he'll let us bring home a new baby?"

Diane looked confused—this conversation had suddenly left her behind. Best to stick with things you understand, she thought. So she ordered, "Robbie! This instant!" And he came.

The three of them jostled past shoppers until they reached the stairway to the lower level, where Diane brought the company to a halt in order to reorganize her packages before descending. Robbie took one of the smaller bags as Carol Anne looked over the railing to the hundreds of milling people below. That's when she saw him.

A man. Tall he was, and so thin that Carol Anne looked quickly

from him to her own fingers and then back again to see which was thinner. He wore a black broad-brimmed hat, a long black linen coat, threadbare black pants, and black leather shoes that laced up high. Old-timey clothes, they looked like. History book clothes. It made Carol Anne think he must be an old preacher.

Or maybe that was the music in her head. Like an old hymn—it sounded as if the man was humming it, though Carol Anne knew she couldn't have heard from that far away. The music was familiar, too. She'd heard it before; she just couldn't place it. Familiar and scary. Then the man looked straight at her.

It made her tighten up all over. She knew him, but she didn't know from where. A hollow man, full of shadow things. He smiled at her, a chilly smile, and began walking toward the stairs . . . and walked through one of the people in his way.

Through him and out the other side, and on toward the stairs.

Carol Anne jumped. "Mom!" she whispered. "Look."

Diane looked down to where her daughter was pointing, but all she saw was Saturday shoppers. "What is it?" she asked the girl.

The man was lost in the crowd, though. "I don't know," said Carol Anne, unsure now. "Someone . . . gone now."

Diane looked a bit concerned. She didn't like it when Carol Anne saw things Diane couldn't. The girl's imagination was altogether too vivid. "Well, come on, then," she said, and took the kids downstairs.

Carol Anne kept looking around behind her, but the man seemed to have disappeared. Still, she'd hear fragments of that song and turn to find it . . . but it would fade into the chattering bustle of the crowd.

Diane stopped in front of a store that held little interest for kids. "I've gotta pick something up," she instructed. "You can wait out here if you promise to stay put. Okay?"

"I'll watch her, Mom," said Robbie.

"Carol Anne?" Diane prodded. She didn't like leaving the girl alone, but at the same time she knew she had to let go a little. Release them into the world. They had to grow up, like anybody else.

"Promise," said Carol Anne. She actually liked it when her mother left her alone—she saw things more clearly, usually.

"Okay, I'll be right back" said Diane, and entered the lingerie store.

Robbie moved to the adjacent window to ogle a rack of BB guns while Carol Anne turned toward a sound at her back.

It was the preacher man, standing right behind her. He was reaching out for her.

She backed up rapidly half a dozen steps into the crowd. She didn't want to be touched by this man; his teeth were yellow, and the air around him was damp.

She looked for Robbie, but she'd gotten turned around and so looked in the wrong direction. When she looked back at the man in black he was becoming transparent, and he quickly vanished. She ran to look for Robbie, but she couldn't see him. She heard him, though. "Mom!" he was calling.

She ran toward his voice, but after only a step, she bumped into a pair of long legs, outfitted in loose black pants and lace-up boots. She raised her eyes. It was he.

"Hi," he purred, his voice like cream gone bad.

"Hi," she replied in monotone, trying to give no encouragement, yet too frightened to run or yell.

In the background she could hear Robbie and Diane talking excitedly—"Mom, she's gone, I don't know where!" "Carol Anne?! Carol Anne!"—but she couldn't answer them, couldn't acknowledge them. As if in a nightmare, she couldn't speak, couldn't even move. Yet she heard them clearly, in a detached kind of way, while another part of her was taking the measure of this smiling, humorless man. It was as though she was two people, or the same person existing simultaneously on two different planes—the plane of this shopping center and the plane of this preacher.

He reached out to touch her.

Suddenly Diane scooped her up. "Honey, what's the matter? You look pale as water. Why'd you run off like that? I told you I was coming right back . . ."

"I dunno . . ." Carol Anne lied, her eyes fixed on the man.

Diane turned to him now, smiling, a bit flustered. "Thanks for stopping her . . ."

"My pleasure," said the man, removing his hat. His hair was wispy, white, the texture of mealy corn silk. His voice, Diane thought, was too high . . . or something. His eyes were like moss.

She walked off with Robbie holding her hand and Carol Anne clinging to her. Carol Anne looked back at the stranger. He put his hat on, then strolled away humming the melody that seemed to live inside her head: It made her start to cry. "I wanna go home, Mom. I don't feel good."

Diane, concerned without knowing exactly why, felt Carol Anne's forehead for fever as she took her children toward the parking lot.

In the distance, Carol Anne saw the strange man walk through a

closed door and disappear.

The man's name was Henry Kane.

Grover Lane was one of the lesser streets on the outskirts of greater Phoenix. Lined mostly with succulents and an occasional juniper, it curved for only a few short blocks, connecting two main suburban arteries. Those few blocks were quiet blocks, though: residential bordering on backwater. The occupants of the homes were predominantly retirees, older couples whose children had grown and left to conquer new suburbs. Jess Williams lived here.

Her house was actually built in the style referred to as California Bungalow—built by her now deceased husband, Avery, who'd grown up in Pasadena and longed for the architecture of his childhood. It was a big old two-story wood frame house with detail in rich oak and walnut, windows of leaded glass, and a garden that blossomed with rose, honeysuckle, azalea, star jasmine, and bold cactus flowers. Blossomed with life. The garden was Jess's domain.

After forty years out there, Avery had finally died of the chronic lung condition that had brought them to the arid land. He spent his last few nights lying on a cot Jess had set up in the garden, inhaling the perfumed memories of his youth, so that when death finally came he was at peace, and Jess felt that his spirit had simply entered the garden.

She would otherwise have moved—the kids were long gone, and she would have been so lonely knocking around the big old house all by herself—but she sensed Avery in that garden they'd shared so many years. He was in every petal, every handful of earth. So she tended the garden—nurtured it, spoke to it, loved it, filled it with her life, and took life from it. And she was content.

And then one of the kids came home, which was cause for great pleasure and comfort to Jess; great joy but for the obvious pain her child was in. Diane's whole family, really, was close to a breakdown.

They'd lost their house, nearly lost their sanity, it seemed. And they wouldn't talk about it. Diane would break into tears at any loud noise, Steve couldn't hold down a steady job, Robbie and Carol Anne had nightmares. Dana, Diane's older daughter, could do nothing but fight with everyone, so when she graduated high school the following year, it took her less than a week to pack her bags and head east for college—as far east as she could get, and don't bother to write.

So of course Jess said they could live there. They were churning apart, trying to hold things together, and Jess foresaw that by being there for them, letting the currents of her home and her self ease

them, their own boiling energy would first simmer, then cool, perhaps even jell. And to a certain extent, she was right. The nightmares receded, the arguments diminished, wild outbursts became controlled. Wounds, unhealed, were at least balmed.

What Jess *hadn't* foreseen was the special nature of her granddaughter, Carol Anne, or the special relationship that would develop between them.

For Carol Anne had dreamsight.

And Jess knew about dreamsight, because she had it herself. Dreamsight was a sense—a kind of sight that encompassed different realms. Many children had it, actually, but most lost it by the age of ten—lost it or had it schooled out, or badgered out, or ignored out, or scolded out by a culture that treasured its blinders. It was a second sight that most people unlearned—only Carol Anne hadn't unlearned it.

Nor, at the unchildish age of seventy-one, had Jess.

So, though Steve and Diane were made uncomfortable by the way Carol Anne spoke to animals or watched the colors of the air, Jess encouraged the girl; she finally had someone who knew her language.

Saturday afternoon, suburban backyard barbecue, burgers and franks sizzling over the coals. Gramma Jess puttered in her garden, talking to the lush flowers that responded quietly to her loving touch; Diane squeezed fresh lemonade in the kitchen; and Steve played whiffle ball with the kids.

Steve was not doing well in his life. After the house had . . . disappeared . . . he'd suffered a serious undermining of his ego; he couldn't hang on to a job or even take one seriously. He had let his appearance become somewhat slovenly—internal justification for his employment record—telling himself, in a sense, that the reason for his troubles was his long hair, his careless demeanor. That wasn't the reason for his troubles, though. The reason was the bottle.

He'd taken to the bottle when he had realized he was not in control of his life, his family, himself.

Carol Anne had vanished for a week four years before, in what Steve believed must have been a wave of mass hypnosis. And Steve had done nothing to save the child. Diane and that strange dwarf had broken the spell.

Then the house had disappeared, and the only way Steve could avoid examining *that* catastrophe too closely was to drink the memory away.

Then Dana, the daughter of his first passion with Diane, had begun flying apart, tearing the edges of the family to shreds. The whole fabric of his life began to unravel. Now he was sponging off his mother-in-law.

Unhomed, unmanned, he'd become a creature of last resorts. And his last, best resort was the fruit of the vine; or, more specifically, of the cactus: tequila settled in as his most steadfast friend and demon.

Diane tried to get him to stop, but by now Diane was part of his problem. Her strengths—her sense of self, of family unity, of center—only magnified his weaknesses. So sometimes he drank just to annoy her, to wear her down.

But after all the snipes and skirmishes, Steve remained afloat because of his children. He loved them unconditionally. Watching them grow was his only remaining solace. He felt that, in all his forty years, he'd produced nothing else of value.

So playing whiffle ball with them this Saturday afternoon provided a real, if brief, measure of peace for Steve. For a few hours he could feel ordinary again.

Robbie pitched, Steve batted, Carol Anne ran around like a jumping bean with legs, chasing stray balls and butterflies, and E. Buzz barked general encouragement.

"Carol Anne, come on!" yelled Robbie. She'd stopped short, holding the ball, to sniff a handful of gardenias Jess had just cut.

Steve took advantage of this break in the action to take a long pull on his beer and counsel his son. "Hey, be patient, kiddo. We got all the time in the world." Then, to Carol Anne: "Sweetpea? The ball?"

Carol Anne had lost interest, though; the flowers were humming to her. "I don't wanna play," she announced, dropping the ball where she stood.

Robbie looked disgusted. Steve finished his beer. Diane came out onto the patio carrying a pitcher of lemonade, just in time to notice great black clouds billowing from the barbecue.

"Steve!" she shouted.

They reached it at the same moment. Steve yanked the lid off: on the grill, the charred remains of once-vital hot dogs and hamburgers shriveled pathetically.

"You've burned the food," she said, less an accusation than the remarking of a cheerless inevitability. She might have said, "It's Monday."

Steve's teeth went on edge instantly. "It's not burnt," he said with great control. "It's well done." There was a note of challenge in his

voice, giving way to indignation. "And since when is this *my* responsibility?" He held up a scorched wiener.

She thought: Since when is *anything* your responsibility lately?

He continued, gathering steam. "I suppose you don't cook anymore."

She wanted to avoid an argument. "I cook *inside.* You're in charge of things *outside.*" The coals flamed brightly, crackling with sausage fat.

Steve had a patronizing tone in his voice that she hated. "If I put a roof over the lawn, will you mow it?"

"As soon as you take the roof off the kitchen." She smiled, trying to keep it light.

He took a big bite out of the still-smoking piece of evidence. "Mmm, just how I like it," he said tersely. He had to grab another beer, though.

"Good, hm?" She didn't conceal her sarcasm.

"Why are you arguing?" said Robbie. He'd been watching this interaction, as had Carol Anne. Both looked concerned.

Steve felt pained, seeing himself with his children's eyes. "We're not arguing, Robbie . . ." he tried lamely.

Diane helped. "We're negotiating."

"Right," Steve went on. "When you're married, there's lots of that."

The kids didn't buy it, of course. Kids may be small, but they're not dumb.

Jess didn't buy it either, watching sadly from the garden.

Diane took the blackened stump of frankfurter from Steve and examined it like a true marital negotiator. "Gee, honey, I think these could use about fifteen more minutes on the grill. What do *you* think?"

He stared at her, started to say something, then just sipped his beer instead.

Diane walked back into the kitchen. "I'll get the cold cuts. And call the fire department."

Later that afternoon, they all sat around the picnic table on the patio, digesting Chinese takeout—except Carol Anne, who didn't like those slippery little noodles. She was eating an open-faced peanut-butter-and-honey-and-M&Ms sandwich.

Diane couldn't look at it directly. "Sweetheart, did you think up that sandwich all by yourself?"

"No, Gramma helped," Carol Anne admitted thoughtfully.

Jess smiled at being allowed to share credit for such a monster creation. She didn't respond, though; she just continued knitting the sweater she was knitting and asked Carol Anne to reach something for her, as if to say she and her granddaughter helped each *other*. "Honey, grab me the red yarn out of my bag, would you?"

Carol Anne, without looking behind her, reached around her back and pulled a skein of red yarn out of Jess's bag. Pulled it out of a bag filled with reds, yellows, blues, lavenders and ochers. Pulled out the red without looking.

She handed the wool to Jess with a smile. No one else noticed what Carol Anne had done, but Jess noticed.

Robbie was busy biting down on a giant egg roll that he couldn't quite get his mouth around. It squirted its mysterious contents out the seams and into his lap.

Diane slipped into her patient-Mom voice. "Rob, try to eat something that's not big enough to eat you . . . okay?"

Robbie nodded, giggling, as E. Buzz licked the spoils from his lap.

Steve nursed a beer laced with tequila and wondered if he should tell Diane to leave the kids alone.

Jess was concentrating on Carol Anne, though. "Honey, could you get me the yellow yarn now?"

Carol Anne, fascinated with Robbie's disgusting eating habits, again reached around behind her and again extracted the color Jess wanted. Again, without looking.

Jess took the yellow ball of yarn from the girl and spoke softly. "Thanks, Angel," she said. But what she thought was: Dreamsight, Angel. Dreamsight, in a world of cataracts.

That evening Steve sat in the living room listening to a ball game on the radio as he read the instructions on the side of a new vacuum cleaner box. Other appliances sat boxed all around him, the arsenal of his current job: door-to-door household convenience salesman.

He was having difficulty with the instructions.

Robbie watched him intently. After the near-disaster with Carol Anne disappearing at the mall this morning (he became extremely nervous whenever Carol Anne's whereabouts could not be accounted for, even briefly) and the barbecue disaster this afternoon, he was curious to see how things would take shape this evening.

"You gotta be an engineer to figure this stuff out," Steve was muttering over the advisory warning about shag rugs at beach houses. His attention was distracted, however, by the roar of the crowd over

the radio. “Come on, Guerero,” Steve ordered, “hit it outta the park.” He had about as much control over the radio game as he had over the stealthy vacuum cleaner that seemed to be silently laughing at his impotence; as much as he had over anything else in his life, really.

Robbie sensed his father’s frustration and tried to champion him past it. “Yeah, hit it!” he chimed—ostenisbly at the radio, but really at Steve.

Suddenly static washed over the radio announcer’s squeal. Steve dived for the dial. “Not now, damn it.”

Robbie wanted Steve to take this as an object lesson. “Dad, can’t we have a TV like everybody else?”

Steve got the reception back. “No, Robbie, we can’t.” Firm. Bottom line. Television is how their troubles had all started back in Cuesta Verde. Those hypnotic visions—whatever they’d been—had entered Steve’s home through the television. Entered his existence. Ruined his life. “No TV,” he said softly.

“Great. I’ll just grow up retarded.”

“Listen, buddy, people don’t get retarded from *lack* of television . . .” There was a swing, and a hit . . . deep into center field . . . going . . . going . . . “Thattaboy, Guerero!” Steve shouted. “Did you see that, Robbie!?”

“No, Dad,” Robbie sulked, “I didn’t *see* it.” He shuffled off to his room.

“Use your imagination!” Steve called after him. “It’s good for you.” He chuckled at *his* object lesson, and plugged in the vacuum cleaner. Like a suddenly reanimated zombie, the machine inflated its lung with a yowling whine and charged across the floor, attacking the coffee table. A vase fell, crashing onto the thing’s casing. The thing turned, seeking new dirt to inhale.

Steve lunged for the vacuum but couldn’t find the right switch. The thing battered a chair. Steve yanked the plug from the wall. Sparks flew. The machine died. Steve sat down hard on the couch, sighed, and noticed Carol Anne standing in the doorway, watching. “How am I gonna sell these monsters to innocent housewives, Sweetpea?”

“Don’t know, Dad.” She left him there staring at his hands and padded into the kitchen, where she found Gramma cleaning up.

“Hello, hon—want to help me get the kitchen straight for breakfast?”

“Sure,” said Carol Anne. She started wiping the counter as Gramma gathered junk from the table.

“What’s this?” said Jess.

Carol Anne looked over. “Just some stuff I drew yesterday.”

It was a pile of manila papers covered with crayon drawings. “Well, let’s *look* at it!” Jess demanded gently, and sat down at the table with the collection. Carol Anne shrugged but came over to Gramma’s side.

Jess knew Diane was working on art therapy projects with Carol Anne—drawing pictures to help the child work out her anxieties—but Jess was of the opinion that such focus sometimes created more anxiety than it worked out. Still, she loved the child’s artwork, and since some of it was quite abstract, she was curious about what it represented to Carol Anne—not for therapeutic reasons; merely for grandmotherly ones.

“Now. You must tell me what this is,” she instructed with great affection.

It was a big yellow circle with red beads all around it, green scribbles over the entire page, a blue background, a black-violet splotch in one corner.

“That’s looking up at a daisy, if you were a rock—and that’s the grass you’re looking through, and that’s the sky.”

“And what’s this dark purple thing up here?”

“That’s a storm cloud. It’s gonna rain soon.”

“That’s terrific,” Jess said, beaming. She put that one at the bottom of the pile, exposing the next picture. “And what’s this?”

It was a house—a square box, a peaked roof—with flowers all around. It had a square central door and two square, slightly elevated windows to the right and left of the door—looking like nothing so much as a mouth and two eyes.

And there were flames behind the windows.

“Our house . . .” said Carol Anne. But a shadow seemed to cross her face, so Jess put this picture at the back and went on to the next one.

But now the shadow crossed Jess’s face as she looked at the disturbing portrait on the third manila sheet. It was the face of a man, and Jess couldn’t say why it was unsettling, but it was. A man in a black hat, a man with yellowed teeth and a smile like fingernails on a blackboard.

Jess didn’t ask about this one; she just went on to the next. And Carol Anne, who’d drawn it the day *before* she had gone to the mall with Diane and Robbie, looked the other way so she wouldn’t have to see it.

It was a crayon drawing of Henry Kane.

CHAPTER 2

From Cuesta Verde Taylor took his battered blue pickup down to 1-10, then east all the way to Phoenix. It was midnight by the time he made the turnoff onto 17, going north, so he stopped for gas, coffee, beef jerky, donuts, and a carton of Orange Crush, to go.

He made another stop just outside Bumble Bee—ten minutes only, long enough to place a fetish object by the grave of his best friend, John Laughing Water—then not again until he was past Flagstaff, on Interstate 40, headed east, did he pull over. A little beyond the Winona ruins, down a narrow two-lane highway that cut through desert now black as the night, was a bar Taylor knew: The Coyote Hogan. It was nearly three A.M. The full moon was just rising.

Two other pickup trucks sat parked in the gravel drive outside the tavern. Taylor stepped down from his bumpy seat and stretched his legs a minute beneath the chilly sky. Dazzling stars spilled overhead, creating their own special order, like a necklace encircling the universe.

Taylor inhaled deeply, smelling the starlight and the bedrock of the sacred mountain that marked this boundary of the land of his people. In beauty may I walk, he thought. Then he approached the front door.

It was locked. The neon signs advertising beer of various brands were turned on, all bright orange and yellow; the lights inside were flickering warmly; the sign in the window said OPEN; but the door was locked. Taylor rattled the handle.

No one answered. He knocked loudly, ten times.

“We’re closed,” someone growled from a point beyond where the bartop turned a corner.

Taylor knocked again, this time until the door opened—only a crack at first; but when the baleful eye saw who was standing there, the door opened all the way. The eye, however, remained half-closed.

“Oh, it’s you,” said Jemez, standing aside for Taylor to pass. He closed and locked the door again after Taylor was inside, then he walked back around the corner out of sight. Taylor followed.

There were three men playing cards in the small back room: Jemez, the owner of the place, a short, leathery man with one eye, the other being a dry socket that gaped like an abandoned mine shaft; Charlie Blackbird, who owned a parcel of uranium-rich land not far from

there but whose spirit was dirt-poor, and Bad Bob, the owner-trainer of the six fighting cocks that strutted restlessly in wood slat cages at opposite ends of the room.

The men nodded at Taylor as he entered, without looking directly at him. “Ya-ta-hey,” said Charlie Blackbird.

“Waiting for a couple buyers from Santa Fe,” said Jemez. “They supposed to come the back way.” He anted and picked his cards up off the table.

Bad Bob tossed a dollar in the kitty. “Open.” They played the hand out without speaking to Taylor again.

When it was over, he spoke. “I’m looking for Sings-With-Eagles.”

“I heard he was in jail over to Gallup,” said Bad Bob. Taylor knew he was lying.

“You try his trailer?” asked Jemez, dealing the cards.

“Not yet,” said Taylor. “Thought I’d stop here first, just in case.”

“He’s in the slammer,” repeated Bad Bob. “In Gallup.” Taylor ignored him.

“Maybe ask at the Snake Dance on Second Mesa,” said Charlie Blackbird. “Full moon tonight.”

Taylor nodded.

“I heard his wife ran away again,” said Jemez.

“Play cards,” Bad Bob ordered the others impatiently.

Taylor turned to leave.

“Make sure the door is locked,” said Jemez.

Taylor was halfway across the bar when he heard Bad Bob call out: “Hey! Chief! You wanna buy a couple good fighting birds?”

Taylor left. When he got to his pickup truck, he found Bad Bob’s wife slouching on the front fender, a drink in her hand. “Well, ya-ta-hey, Taylor,” she said softly, every syllable an insinuation.

“Your husband’s inside, Gloria,” he said, then got in the truck and started the engine. She stood back, spilling her drink. He pulled out. His headlights swept past her, showing her standing alone under the low moon, arms across her chest, head leaning to one side, staring back at him. Then she was out of his glare, swallowed again by darkness, and he drove off.

Back to the main road, east on 40 once more until he reached Diablo Canyon; then up the canyon and into the Painted Desert. He was in the Navajo Nation now.

Just past the Little Colorado he sensed the sunrise nearing, so he

stopped his truck and walked out into the desert. This was a magic time to be here, and Taylor needed all the magic he could gather now. It was the moment when Changing Woman—who was the child of Darkness and Dawn—most clearly revealed herself. It was a time of extraordinary beauty.

He crossed over a rise so the truck would be out of sight and sat facing east. As he fingered his medicine bag the sky turned from black to thick gray, suffused this with violet, then lightened it by adding peach, then amber, then robin's-egg blue . . . then the magenta sliver that was the sun, striking him abruptly, his shadow instantly racing across the sand and then stopping, like a fifty-mile-long knife poised at his back.

Taylor chanted:

"In beauty may I walk,

All day may I walk,

Beauty before me, with it I wander.

Beauty behind me, with it I wander,

Beauty below me, with it I wander,

Beauty above me, with it I wander,

On the beautiful trail I am.

With it I wander."

This was the Night Way, the Way that cured anguish. There would be much anguish where he was bound, and though he was learned in these Ways, he always had more to learn. And it was from the earth that one learned. From the harmony of the land.

Here, the land of his people, the Dineh: there was profound meaning in every butte and mesa.

A remoteness, too, was here—in the soul of the land and of the people. And of this person.

Taylor watched an eagle circle high above and suddenly dive, as if pulled by an invisible wire. It hit the ground with a *screek,* then took to the air again with a rabbit squirming in its talons. Eighty feet up the rabbit writhed free and sailed to the ground in a slow, graceful arc not ten yards from where Taylor sat. The eagle, uncertain of Taylor's intentions, flew off into the sun.

Taylor stood, walked over to where the rabbit lay, crouched beside it. It was bloody but alive: paralyzed by terror or, more likely, a broken neck, its eyes stared wildly up at him. He placed his hand on its chest. Its heartbeat was nearly a trill.

He asked the animal's forgiveness, in deference to the intricate interrelationship of all things; then, quickly twisting its head, he killed it. At the moment of death he brought the rabbit's mouth to his own and inhaled deeply, drinking the Sacred Wind of Life.

And just as he did this he heard the eagle sing. This he took as an omen, and he returned to his truck to continue his search for the old magus.

Just within the border of the Hopi Nation Taylor found the desert mule path that took him past the arroyo where Sings-With-Eagles kept his trailer. It was up on cinder-blocks—an old, rusting, twelve-foot Airstream, its windows broken, its door long gone. A mangy dog stood barking near the hitch. Taylor called out, but he could feel no one was home.

Next he went to Sings-With-Eagles's Kiva—the sacred underground chamber used by the Hopi for storing fetishes, ringing chants, working magic. He located the Sipapu—the opening—to the old man's personal underworld by following a finger of rock that pointed to a pile of dead cottonwood that kept the Sipapu in shadow most of the day. The fire pit in the Kiva was still warm, the totems carefully spaced around its perimeter, but Sings-With-Eagles was not there.

It was noon when Taylor got to Second Mesa, and the Snake Dance was in progress. Hundreds of dancers, masked, feathered—some possessed—chanted and reeled in the ancient ceremony, twisting amid the thousands of snakes they'd gathered from the desert, snakes they hypnotized with yucca wands, snakes they enchanted, snakes they dangled from their mouths.

Taylor skirted the main event, walked down two backstreets, and entered a pueblo with covered windows, dark but for a single candle burning in the corner. On a rug beside the candle sat an old, blind woman—a Snake Priestess once, now too old for anything but memories and waiting.

"Hummingbird Grandmother," said Taylor, sitting cross-legged before her.

She tilted her unseeing head. "Taylor, Taylor, last of the renegade Koyemshi," she joked—a reference to the Zuni mudhead Kachinas; they were the sacred clowns, deformed, insane, yet potent. Thus did she think of Taylor.

"I seek Sings-With-Eagles, Grandmother," he said. "I would do battle, and he must show me the Way "

She nodded. "Even this morning he told me to look for you." Her opaque eyes were concentric rings of blue, tan, black—like a sand

painting. “But he had to leave,” she continued. “I think his wife ran away again.”

Taylor nodded. “He will be back?”

She shrugged. “He is eagle. He will come when hunger hurts him.”

“You know where he went?”

“To beyond Black Mesa. To his totem rock,” she said, head nutating. “He had that look about him.” She smiled.

Taylor smiled. “You have needs before I go?”

“Hunger hurts the hummingbird no less than the eagle, though she has not claws.”

He went out, drove all the way back to the rabbit felled by the eagle in the desert, retrieved it, and returned to Hummingbird Grandmother. Closing the circle, maintaining the harmony, sensing the pattern, flowing into the weave.

He spent the rest of the afternoon cooking the rabbit, then he shared the meal with the old woman. It was evening when he headed his truck up toward Black Mesa, and night came quickly, for there were no stars—only a rumbling of clouds so low they fogged his windshield.

He reached the base of the rock around nine. Not a rock, really; an obelisk. Like a Roman column, fifty feet around, three hundred feet tall, it rose straight up to the sky without so much as a foothold to gain access up its sheer sides.

Well, hardly a foothold.

Taylor stood back from it and looked to the top. Lightning struck out from the roiling clouds just beyond it, struck like a serpent’s tongue, illuminating a fall of rocks along one side of the base—a fall of rocks that might provide a grade to start climbing.

It was another omen.

Taylor started climbing.

In the distance to the south, thunder shook the air.

Thunder rattled the kitchen window as Jess put Carol Anne’s crayon drawings aside.

“You’re real good at drawing,” she said as if she were sharing a secret with the girl. “Would you like to be an artist when you grow up?”

“Maybe.” Carol Anne shrugged. “Don’t wanna grow up much.” She had seen, once, what grownups could become.

"How come?" said Jess.

"Probably not much fun."

"Oh, sure it is!" Jess protested. "I've loved being every age I've been. They all have their blessings." Even old age, which most of the young reject or abhor—even this is a special time. "When I was your age," she went on, "I learned I could do things other folks couldn't."

"Like what kinda things?" Carol Anne wanted to know, half-suspicious, half-intrigued.

"Well, I just knew things. I didn't know how I knew. But I did."

Curiouser and curiouser. "Well, like what?"

"Well, when I was your age my aunt lost her bracelet and I knew where it was—two miles from our house, in a place I'd never been." She paused and stared at Carol Anne, searching deeply for truths in the child she loved so well. "You ever know things and couldn't explain why?"

Carol Anne broke into a slow, embarrassed smile.

"Yes?" pushed Gramma Jess.

"Yes," said Carol Anne.

"Well, my darling, that's a special gift you and I have. It's nothing to be scared of, and it's nothing to be ashamed of. It's made my life full of wonder."

Steve heard this on his way upstairs and almost stopped to say something, but he only frowned and kept walking.

Carol Anne was concentrating hard on what her grandmother had said. "Will it help me be a ballerina?" she coaxed.

Jess laughed and hugged the girl. "Sure will. Anything you can dream, you can be."

Carol Anne wasn't sure she liked that, though. She knew her dreams only too well.

Steve entered the bedroom and flopped down beside Diane on the bed.

"Your mother's at it again," he said.

"Hm? At what?" She was going through papers.

"Diane, we've got to keep her from freaking out Carol Anne."

"She's fine. Really," Diane said, though she verbalized more than felt her words. "I have bad news, though. They've denied our claim again, Steve."

"What?!"

Diane shook her head. "We never should have told them the house vanished into thin air . . ."

He was outraged, but finally this was just one more failure on the pile of failures his life had become—and therefore hardly unexpected. "See? You tell the truth and what do you get for it? *Nada."*

Diane tried staying with her thought, rather than getting caught up in one of his increasingly self-pitying harangues. "They said if it disappeared, then technically it's only missing."

"What do they think—it's gonna return?! It's been four years, Diane. It's not coming back. I have a gut feeling about this. Tell them I'm positive . . ."

"They say they sent an investigator out to the property and there was nothing there, not a board, not a nail . . ."

"That's what *we* told *them* . . ."

"But if the house had been destroyed by something we were *covered* for, like fire, explosion, natural disaster, whatever, there should be some remains, or evidence *of* the natural disaster . . ."

"Yeah? What about supernatural distasters?"

"And they seem to imply, though they never accuse, that since the property values obviously bottomed out in that area, as 'evidenced by the surfeit of abandoned buildings in the immediate environs' "—and here she was reading from the insurance company's letter while Steve silently sulked—"they seem to imply that they suspect we had the house *moved,* to collect the insurance."

"Moved! Moved to the Twilight Zone, is where it was moved! Tell them . . . Never mind. I'll tell them myself. I'm filing our fourth claim."

"Good for you, honey." Diane liked to encourage his take-charge moods. On the other hand, she still had to broach the subject she'd been leading up to ever since Steve had come in. "In the meantime," she said, "we're almost broke."

Steve visibly shriveled. "Hey, do we have to go through this again? We're not exactly starving, you know."

"No, we're not," Diane admitted. "But I don't like living off my mother, and I'd like a home of my own."

That pulled Steve's plug. "That's the difference between you and me, Diane," he said, starting on a slow roll of sarcasm. "I *enjoy* downward mobility. I *want* to sell vacuum cleaners door to door the rest of my life. Being homeless and broke makes *me* feel upbeat. Patriotic. Proud!" This last word lifted him off the bed, and with gathering momentum he began to pace. "Like the way it *used* to be!

Out in the streets with the people! Get the paints and brushes, Diane—we'll make the car day-glo and hit the road together! That fabulous family whose house disappeared! Come one, come all! See the famous Freaky Freelings!"

"Honey, you were never a hippie." Diane tried to calm him with quiet patience.

"Huh?" he said, losing the pace of his rhetoric.

"You were *never* out in the streets with 'the people.' You always wanted to make money. The only reason you painted your van all those colors and grew your hair long was to impress Cookie Gurnich."

"Gur*nick*. Cookie Gur*nick."* His eyes lit up at the memory.

"Miss Free Love." Now she was losing her patience.

"True." He nodded, reflecting fondly. "But you know something—"

"I hated you then, Steven." It made her realize that for all the problems he was having, she loved him now.

"But I always made up with you." He grinned. "Remember how?"

"Don't try it now," she warned. She was still pissed off about Cookie Gurnich.

"Do you remember how?" he goaded.

"No, I don't." She did.

"Come on. You do," he prodded. He tried pulling her off the bed. She resisted.

"Oh, yeah," she allowed, "you'd sing that stupid song. Don't toy it, Steven. I still haven't forgiven you for Cookie Gurnich."

"Gur*nick*," he laughed, pulling her up into his arms, slow-dancing as he sang "If I Fell in Love with You" by the Beatles.

Before long she laughed back, even let him dip her. "Is it true Cookie crumbled in your hand?" she asked gaily.

At which point Carol Anne did a rather dramatic little pas de deux into the doorway. "Mom! Dad! I'm a ballerina!"

Steve and Diane stopped their dance in mid-step as Carol Anne's smile wilted only barely. "Am I interrupting again?" she said, sensing the *dansus interruptus.*

"Yes," Steve and Diane chorused. Steve stood straight and intoned, "You're late for bed, Miss Ballerina." Then he raised his arms slowly above his head, flexing and wiggling his fingers, flaring his nostrils, taking one halting step forward.

Carol Anne burst into uncontrollable giggles and raced out of the room. "Not the Tickle Monster!" she screamed.

In a tickle frenzy, the Monster stalked her to her room.

An hour later, the day seemed finally to be winding down. Robbie and Carol Anne were in bed, Steve in the shower, Diane and Jess in the kitchen having coffee, sitting at the table. Jess was absently turning pages in a seed catalogue as Diane perused Carol Anne's crayon drawings. When she came to the picture of Henry Kane, she repressed a shiver but was unable to stifle an involuntary gag.

Jess felt it and looked up.

Diane said, "I don't know," as if Jess had just asked her a question out loud. Jess had only thought the question, though. Diane continued: "I think it's something she made up in her imagination. It's just a drawing." A sense of loathing came over her she couldn't describe; nor could she bridle the compulsion that seized her next: she tore the picture up. "It's ugly," she whispered.

She was horrified with herself—how could she do such a thing as to tear up one of her child's own creations? This picture was an expression of Carol Anne's being; it was even an integral part of her therapy to draw such things . . . such ugly things.

But Diane couldn't help herself. She looked away from her mother.

Jess saw the conflict on Diane's face but was unsure what it was about. Doubts about Carol Anne, she suspected. "You know," Jess said gently, "she can see colors with her hands. She has many gifts."

This thoroughly exasperated Diane. "Mother, please! I don't want to hear this stuff. Steve doesn't want to hear it either, and he doesn't want Carol Anne to hear it most of all. Okay?"

"It's nothing to be afraid of." Jess spoke calmly. It was obvious Diane was raw with fear. Of what?

Diane was angry, too. "How do you know what we should be afraid of?" She paused as she thought of Carol Anne crying from another dimension, of demons and visions and corpses bubbling out of the ground and her house being sucked into the void, and Carol Anne's nightmares and Dana leaving forever. "You weren't there, were you?" She said it like an accusation. She was near tears.

"Why don't you tell me?" said Jess. "Maybe it will help."

"I did tell you." Trying to cut off further questions.

"Not everything." Pushing.

"Well, I don't remember everything." This was true. She'd forgotten as much as she could.

"Try," whispered Jess.

Diane knew her mother just wanted to help, so she tried. "Well . . .

first the parakeet died." That was how she marked the beginning of that week of terror. Or maybe it was just an omen. But it reminded her of something else. "Then the chairs went funny, and I thought it was kind of exciting . . . but then it started." She got cold, and her voice got soft. "Carol Anne was gone . . . and then I went . . . I don't remember anything after that." This was not true. But she didn't *want* to remember anything after that.

Yet the memories came—as if she'd taken her finger out of the dike, she was suddenly almost drowned with visions: strange silhouettes of people wandering beneath a ring of light, herded by a creature so vile she could not look, could only try to shun its putrescent odor and clattering teeth as she groped madly for Carol Anne, who was crying, crying . . .

Diane twisted in the kitchen chair.

"Something wrong?" Jess tried to tap into it.

"No," said Diane flatly. This was just what she wanted to avoid, these waking nightmares. "I really don't remember anything . . . and I want to go on with my life. All that other stuff—it's over." She would make a fortress of herself. She would let nothing in. She would be strong.

Jess wanted to hold her, but she felt the walls going up. "You've got to go unafraid into this life," she urged. "You don't want to instill fear into that child, who is truly gifted and filled with knowledge. Fear will only snuff it out . . . or pervert it."

"I don't *want* her to be gifted!" Diane shouted. She wanted an ordinary child, leading an ordinary life in an ordinary house. When the gods bestowed gifts, the instructions were too often written in madness.

Jess shook her head sadly. "I think you're making a terrible mistake."

Diane's drawbridge was closing, though. "Please, Mom, I don't want to discuss it anymore. I'm going to bed. Good night." Cold, the wind around stone walls. Cold and unyielding, she walked from the room.

Jess watched her daughter's retreat up the stairs and whispered: "I love you. I'll be there if you want me."

Midnight. Steve and Diane slept soundly, not quite touching. At the foot of their bed, sleeping crosswise, was Carol Anne, wrapped in a blanket. She'd gotten scared in her own room, so she'd come down there. Clutched in her arms was the guardian angel doll, Katrina, that Gramma Jess had given her for her last birthday.

At five minutes past midnight, Carol Anne opened her eyes.

She didn't know why; she was just awake. Silently she got up, carrying her doll and blanket out of the room.

Down the hall, past Jess's room, past the linen closet, toward her own bedroom door . . . suddenly she stopped, turned, and went back to Gramma's room. She didn't know why; she just went in.

Gramma Jess was asleep, a look of profound peace on her face. Carol Anne walked to the side of the bed, leaned over, and kissed the old woman on the cheek. She didn't know why.

When she went into her own bedroom, Robbie was sleeping, hanging half off the bed, with E. Buzz lying smugly on Robbie's pillow. Carol Anne was about to get into bed when she heard something and turned her head sharply. E. Buzz awoke at the same moment, staring immediately in the direction Carol Anne was looking: at her pink toy telephone sitting on the floor.

What they'd heard was a voice.

Carol Anne walked over to the phone and sat down. Moonshine through the skylight washed over the plastic, making it look almost luminescent, almost lit from inside.

Carol Anne picked up the receiver. "Yes . . . yes . . . I'll be good. I love you, too. Good night, Gramma." Then she hung up, climbed into bed, and went to sleep.

It was not a sleep of rest, though.

* * *

There remained thirty minutes to midnight when Taylor reached the top of the obelisk. It was flat, ageless stone, twenty feet across, with sparse brush growing between the cracks. A small fire burned at the center of the plateau in a fire pit kept holy by local shamans, for this was a place of power, very near where the Hopi people were said to have emerged into this world. Nobody else was there, so Taylor sat by the fire to warm himself.

The thunderclouds had passed, leaving the night sky again full of stars. Taylor stared through the fire at the outline of Black Mesa in the near distance, the thick stars rising above it like sparks from the fire, frozen in space and time. Then they seemed to unfreeze—to shift position, fold over on themselves, take on depth and shape within the flames—until suddenly Taylor realized the shape was human: there was a man sitting opposite him on the other side of the fire. It was the man called Sings-With-Eagles.

He was an old man. A Hopi. He wore a white bandanna around his

forehead to hold his long white hair back. His shirt was midnight blue, his beadwork desert red. His fetishes were spread out on the ground before him. He carried a tom-tom.

He took some powder from a deerskin bag and sprinkled it over the fire. Sparks flew up to the sky with a rush, seeming not to stop until they found a new place in the heavens.

He sang in the language of his people: "We ask this place of power to bring forth the knowledge of smoke." The sparks became as comets, trailing into deep space. "May the smoke teach us and guide us."

"Thank you for coming here, Sings-With-Eagles," said Taylor, also in Hopi. "I have much need of your wisdom."

"I am sorry to be late," said the old man, "but I could not locate a babysitter, and my wife ran away again."

After a suitable pause, Taylor said, "I would go to the Dark Canyon, in the land of Moski, where the Dead forever walk."

The old man's eyes filled with laughing stars. "To get to the Land of the Dead is but a short journey from here, Wanderer. You have only to walk ten paces in any direction and fall, with grace or without, to the foot of this mesa."

Taylor smiled. "I would go, Grandfather—but I would also return."

"Ah," said Sings-With-Eagles. "A more difficult journey. And the Dark Canyon is where the Evil Ones dwell—they are fearful to gaze upon, yet you must not look away, for then you will become lost there forever. The Dark Land is filled with spirits who feared to look on the Evil Ones and thus lost sight of the Way to the Upper World."

"The Navajo say, 'Never shut your eyes in fear, lest ye go blind—for the Masked Dancers, the Yei, in the moment your eyes are closed, will snatch them out.' "

The old man smiled. "The Navajo cannot have lived so long near the Hopi without learning *something."* He nodded. Then he reached around behind himself and picked up an ornately tooled spear. "Great evil is coming," he continued. "An ancient evil, one you know well. But now it is coming after another—after a child and, I think, her family. You can use this family, though—and if you use them with care, you may defeat the Evil One."

He handed the spear to Taylor and went on. "This weapon has been held by many hands in many battles, many lands. It was used by Spider Grandmother in the Fourth World to destroy the monsters of that place before our people emerged here. It was used by my grandfather against Carson, before the Long Walk . . ."

"Your grandfather was *defeated* by Carson," Taylor protested.

"Because the spear was not used with care," instructed the old shaman. "It must not be used in anger or vengeance, but with thought and truth. It has powers from another world, but it can only be an extention of the spirit that wields it. If the spirit is small . . ." Sings-With-Eagles shrugged, as if the results were self-evident.

"And this spear can be of use in the Dark Land?"

Sings-With-Eagles did not answer directly. "The door to the Lower World is attended by Masauwu, Guardian of the Land of the Dead. It is to him we must first sing."

And Sings-With-Eagles sang. It was a ceremony Taylor knew, but the old man knew it better, he blended with his music, and his music blended with the patterns of the universe in such a way as to achieve complete harmony, a perfect weaving of spirit, such that he *was* the knowledge he sought.

Taylor stared deeply into the fire as the chant mixed with the smoke and flame. Sparks swirled there again, creating patterns and shapes of dark color, occult meaning. Taylor let himself merge further into the spirit of the fire.

The smoke began to curl upward like a serpent, then twist and hover directly above Taylor, as if it would strike him.

Sings-With-Eagles spoke. "It is frightening, but do not fear." He motioned Taylor to rise.

Taylor rose into the smoke. It billowed over him, snaking around his body like a second skin. Taylor inhaled, his arms upraised. The smoke entered his mouth and nostrils as if it were a living thing, fleeing into the warmth of his great chest.

Sings-With-Eagles chanted. "Smoke . . . make him one with power and knowledge." The fire burned brighter. The old man nodded, responding to the spirits that guided him. "Taylor, you are to enter this Lower World through your dreams . . ."

Taylor's eyes closed. Trance engulfed him.

The old man continued: "Taylor, you are to die . . ."

Taylor's spirit flew into the fire, into the smoke . . .

"Taylor, you are to pass first through a Canyon of Shadows . . ."

Carol Anne floated through a canyon of shadows. This part of her dream was recurrent, and it was the only part she ever remembered—because it was the part she liked. And she liked it even though she knew it was supposed to be scary . . . because this was the place where Sceädu lived.

He was the shadow-creature. He couldn't be distinguished from the background—the bottomless pits, the congealed gray boulders, the darkling bends of space—except by his movement, which was furtive, full of mean stealth. His intent was grim: to engulf any passing spirit, to feed on its life force; and once a spirit was engulfed, there was no escape. Eternal darkness—life within Sceädu—was the fate.

There was but one defense, and that was to jump *through* his shadow form in the moment before he was to consume your spirit. Most froze in fear at that moment and this succumbed to his darkness.

Carol Anne thought it was a game, though. She tracked Sceädu around his own shadowy domain, surprising him from behind and leaping through him before he was even aware of her presence.

Once through him, Carol Anne entered another plane. On this plane Sceädu still existed, but his nature was different: here he was a shadow-sprite who didn't stalk but ran, elusive as shadow in a sunny fog. When she wanted to return to the original Shadow Land—to get home—it would be necessary to chase this elfen Sceädu, to find him, and to jump through him again. Much harder to do in this dimension—a place of mists and wandering souls and that bright, bright light that hurt Carol Anne's eyes and made it hard to see.

This was the place that scared Carol Anne. The place she never remembered in the morning.

Once here, she could never understand why she'd come, which scared her even more. Tonight she huddled in the chill vapors, watching the pitiable faces of the wretched spirits that floated all around her. If she stayed long enough, they would come closer and closer, never quite touching her, but desperately wanting to. She backed away—away from the light, away from the weeping forms that gravitated toward her, away to someplace she hoped she could corner Sceädu so she could dive back through him to the other side and home again—and she backed into Henry Kane.

She jumped and spun around and stood shivering, watching him. As before, he wore a black, wide-brimmed hat, a loose black preacher's coat, a black string tie over a frayed cotton shirt. He hummed his sorrowful melody, smiling his gaunt smile, and reached out to touch her. She backed away a step. His hand seemed unearthly cold, and even though he and she didn't actually touch, her teeth began to chatter.

"Come child," he said. "Don't be afraid. Come along with Reverend Kane."

She shook her head no.

"It was I who kept you from getting lost this morning at the

shopping plaza. Don't you remember?"

She shook her head no.

"Come, then, put your hand on my heart—you can feel how pure it is."

He took a step toward her; she took a step back.

"Touch my heart," he repeated, his smile mellowing to entreaty. "Then I'll know you trust me, and we can be friends."

He pulled open his jacket, exposing the thin white shirt that covered the left side of his chest. A gesture of vulnerability.

She shook her head no.

"Please," he beckoned. "Don't reject me. I'm opening myself up to you." His voice was soft, vaguely Southern, in a register high enough to suggest imbalance.

She trembled, looked around for escape, but her feet would not move.

He loosened his tie, began slowly to unbutton his shirt. "Let me lay myself open to your touch," he pleaded, pulling his shirt open.

Beneath his shirt, there was no skin—only glistening ribs, shreds of rotting muscle, oozing veins enclosing a dark red heart that beat, slapped against the ribcage, and gray-pink lungs that dripped like sodden sponges.

Carol Anne gagged. She'd never seen the insides of a person; it was a horror. But she couldn't move.

"Touch my heart," he beseeched her. "Here, let me make it easy for you."

He grabbed his left third rib and, with a wrenching crack, tore it out of his chest wall and threw it away. Blood seeped from the ragged end of his breastbone; the pumping heart seemed to push itself against the space made by the absent rib, as if it were trying to squeeze through between the second and fourth ribs, as if it were straining on a leash to attack Carol Anne.

She couldn't breathe, she couldn't think; she could only stare.

"Let me make it easier for you," he whispered, and grabbed his fourth rib.

There was a sickening crunch as he pulled the fourth rib out and let it drop. His heart flipped around wildly now, jerking against its vascular connections, pushing the opening in the ribcage, getting tugged back.

"There." Kane smiled. "I couldn't be more open. But you must meet me halfway. Come, child, it's so warm. Come, touch my heart."

She couldn't stop staring at the thing, all red-black and flopping like a bloated fish.

"Here, now, it wants to be touched so badly." There was gentle scolding in his voice. "You can see plain as anything how it's tryin' to get near you. Just wants to be held, like we all do. Here, I'll show you."

Without even wincing, he splintered the remaining ribs out of his left chest, leaving only the heart exposed and pulsating along the underside of the dark, slippery lung.

He looked down. "Ah, getting shy, now, are you?" he said to his heart. So he pulled his lung away as if it were a curtain; then he reached his other hand up, cupping his heart tenderly, like a dying bird, and lifted it out of the chest cavity toward Carol Anne, as far as it would go without tearing from the aorta.

"Here," he said to Carol Anne. "It's not so wild now. It just wants to be held. Here, now—*you* can hold it."

CHAPTER 3

Taylor had his own way of approaching Sceädu in the Canyon of Shadows. He located the creature by sensing disharmony *among* the shadows—the flow of darknesses that moved, wavelike, there—and when he'd found him, he chanted the song of the Shadow Way, restoring the harmony, putting the benighted creature at rest. And when Sceädu was thus nestled in his proper place, Taylor stepped through him to the next plane—the place of mists and souls and the One Light.

He shielded his eyes from the Light but did not falter. He looked closely from face to face until he found the one he sought—the evil one, dressed in black, with eyes like moss. Taylor watched him approach a young, lost girl and try to befoul her spirit with self-mutilation. The girl wavered.

Taylor was about to intervene in this obscenity when he noticed someone else observing the interaction: an old woman, heading toward the Light. She'd stopped in her journey, though, to watch the young girl confront this monster of a man.

Taylor approached the old-woman-spirit. "Do not watch this shameful display," he told her. "Go into the Light, if that is your journey."

The old woman's lip quavered. "She's my granddaughter," she said, nodding toward the young girl. "She needs my help."

"I will help her," Taylor promised. "But if your journey is into the Light and you do not go, you will wander here in the Dark Canyon forever with the Evil Ones—like *that* thing." He pointed at Kane, who was now ripping out pieces of his own lung with his teeth and eating them in front of Carol Anne, trying to force her into submission through horror.

Taylor moved between Kane and Carol Anne. "Perhaps it is for me to touch your heart."

Kane backstepped with a grimace. "You . . ." he growled.

"And you," Taylor answered flatly. He looked momentarily at Carol Anne. "Be not afraid." Then he reached into his medicine bag, pulled out an ancient obsidian lance tip, and, quicker than thought, touched it to Kane's heart.

Kane screamed, making no sound. His heart was punctured where it

had been touched. Out poured first vile smoke, then thick matter that curdled in the light, then putrid snakes and newts, all wriggling to get free, tearing the hole open wider as they squirmed away.

Then Kane just diffused into the ether and was gone. When Jess saw this she rested easier and called thanks to Taylor, and she continued her journey into the Light.

Taylor turned to Carol Anne. “Go now,” he said, pointing to where Sceädu still lay, enchanted by Taylor’s song.

Carol Anne stared in wonder a long moment at Taylor; then she scampered over to Sceädu and jumped through.

And the rest of her sleep was dreamless.

Taylor, too, returned to the Upper World. But when he opened his eyes, sitting atop the cold stone obelisk, the wind had died down, the fire was out, the smoke was gone.

And Sing-With-Eagles was nowhere to be seen.

Ten o’clock the next morning, Steve was on the phone to the family lawyer. “No, Diane found it this morning . . . Yeah, in her sleep, very peacefully, the doctor said. No, he just left. Okay, we’ll be in touch. Yes, I will.” He hung up and turned to Diane, who was crying as she did the dishes.

“God, I wish I hadn’t behaved so badly last night,” she said. “I mean, my last words to her were angry.”

“Di . . . she knew you loved her.”

“If I only had one more day . . .” She turned from the sink to wipe her hands, angry at herself.

The kids were standing in the doorway, listening.

Diane tried to get herself under control. “Gramma passed away last night . . .” she began.

“She died?” said Robbie, startled.

Carol Anne felt the knowledge of this strike her like a slap in the face; her regret was edged somehow with fear.

Diane started crying again.

“Kids,” said Steve, “your mom needs some hugs.”

And they all wrapped arms around one another, crying and comforting and not comprehending the vast, heartless mystery of death.

That afternoon Diane walked through her mother’s garden, looking for

meaning in memory.

She remembered herself as a small girl in the same garden, helping Jess plant the first flowers: the same rose bush that blossomed beside her now. Jess had hugged her then, and she remembered thinking: I will never be happier.

She sniffed a yellow rose, closed her eyes; the memory engulfed her, brought tears again as the wind rose and dropped petals in her hair. They felt like her mother's fingertips, touching her delicately. Almost as if Jess was right there again.

"Mom," Diane whispered; and the wind picked up, dropping more petals. "There are so many things . . . so many things I wish I'd told you . . . You always made me feel so safe . . ." Her mother's presence completely encircled her, lifting her out of time and mind to a place of eternal unity. "Mom, I love you so much."

And suddenly the wind settled, and Jess's presence was gone.

"I wish you were here now." Diane looked up at the sky, then to the ground. "Good-bye, Mom."

She wiped away her tears, took a deep breath. There was no meaning in memory, but there was love.

Steve, who'd been watching her from the patio, stepped forward and hugged her. "We'll make it," he whispered. "I love you."

Carol Anne came running out of the house, wearing her ballerina costume, holding out two silver wings. "Mom, can you put these on me so I'll be a ballerina with wings?" she asked.

She took the wings lovingly from her daughter and spoke with a bit of Jess's inflection. "Darlin', you can be anything you want to be."

That night it rained. Great charcoal clouds of rain, detonated by lightning that was eerily silent. The drops fell slowly at first, as if they were testing the house, waiting for a response. There was no response, though; for the first night in many years, Jess's vital spirit no longer inhabited the place.

The rain came down harder.

A harsh wind rose up, too, driving the rain sideways—under the eaves, under the flashing. Under the lip of the skylight in Carol Anne's and Robbie's room.

The rain dripped from this unsealed corner of skylight to the floor of the kids' room. To the toy phone on the floor. Making the toy bell on the toy phone go *ding*.

For just the briefest moment, all the clectrical toys in the bedroom

winked on: the magic castle night-light, the Lava Lamp, the Talk-a-Dolly, the Speed-King race car—the miniature robot even walked two steps toward Robbie, then stopped. As if, for an instant, they were alive.

Rain *ping*ed the phone again, and Carol Anne opened her eyes. She got out of bed quietly, sat on the floor by the phone, picked up the receiver.

It was Gramma's voice on the other end.

"Hi, Gramma," said Carol Anne. "Do you have wings now? My ballerina costume does. Gramma . . ." she started to go on, but when Gramma spoke back, it was in a slightly different voice.

"Gramma, you sound funny," said Carol Anne. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm okay," said the voice, but it definitely wasn't Gramma now. "I'm okay because I can see you. Just like I saw you last night, when you saw me."

"Who are you?" said Carol Anne. She didn't like the voice. It was high and silky sweet.

"I'm the man of your dreams, child. Remember me?"

"No, uh-uh . . . I don't remember . . ." And she didn't, by the grace of God.

Robbie opened his eyes.

"Yes, she's my guardian angel," Carol Anne said into the phone. "What?" She looked at the receiver queerly, saying, "Okay, I'll get her." She picked her doll up off the floor and held the receiver to its ear; then she took the phone back from the doll.

The voice said to Carol Anne, "Katrina's a nice doll. Would you like me to turn *you* into a nice little doll like Katrina?"

"How'd you know Katrina's name?" said Carol Anne.

"I know everything," said Kane. "Because I'm smaaaaart."

"Oh . . ."

But before she could respond further, there was a snapping of electrical discharges all over the room as a smoky substance exuded from the mouthpiece of the toy phone. Carol Ann dropped it. Robbie sat up in bed, fear pulling his face tight.

A wispy, steamy tentacle snaked out of the receiver, twisting higher, giving birth to itself, translucent and cold. Hovering above Carol Anne, it grew brighter.

"Carol Anne!" Robbie tried to yell, but it came out a croak.

The ectoplasm brewed around the ceiling, becoming a hand that danced, flexed, palpated the fixtures. Then it reformed into something

resembling a head and torso, but mutant, corrupt. It seemed to gaze around, studying the room, studying Carol Anne.

With a sudden ripping *CRACK*, it expelled itself completely from the phone, into the room—and with an intense, bursting light, it migrated violently into the walls.

The house shook like an earthquake was upon it, and it didn't stop.

Diane woke up first; she thought she was dreaming. "Steven!"

They jumped out of bed together as lamps crashed to the floor, books tumbled from shelves. They lost their footing twice as they ran down the hallway to the children's room, but the tremor halted as soon as they reached the door.

Inside they found Carol Anne and Robbie huddled in the middle of the floor, clutching each other and Carol Anne's guardian angel doll.

When she saw her parents, Carol Anne knew it was starting all over again; and she knew she had to tell them. "They're here," she said.

Steve's face went white. "Oh, shit . . . not again . . ."

It took them about five minutes to dress and pack. Carol Anne carried only her doll, Diane carried only her daughter, Steve carried only one suitcase, Robbie carried a knapsack full of toys.

E. Buzz barked incessantly as the whole troop clambered down the stairs, then along the front hallway toward the door. And the entire distance they were followed by the thudding of huge, monster footsteps, pounding closer each moment, within the substance of the house.

"Hurry, please, hurry," Diane whimpered. "Don't turn around." Just like last time. It was all coming back.

"Don't panic!" bellowed Steve. Then, in a whisper "Don't panic!!"

"Oh, God," prayed Robbie. Maybe the thing was after *him* this time.

"Don't stop!" shouted Steve.

Diane reached the front door first, swung it open, and screamed: there was something there.

Someone, actually. It was Taylor.

The pounding in the house grew louder, as Steve moved forward angrily on the large man who was impassively blocking their way. "Who the hell are *you*?"

"Name's Taylor," said Taylor stoically.

"Well . . . great," said Steve, plowing past him with family in tow. "Nice meeting you. We're going now."

The reverberating footsteps were almost to the front door . . . but

Taylor made a quick gesture and spoke an ancient Way, and the footsteps disappeared.

Then he turned to Steve, who was already in the driveway, hunting for his car keys. “Tangina Barrons sent me,” he said to the fleeing Freelings.

Steve found his keys. “Terrific. Say hello to the magic munchkin for us.” He opened the car door.

Diane was slowed by that name, though. She looked at Taylor. “Sent you for what?” she said.

“It’s no use running,” said Taylor. “It’ll find you. You’re better off here.”

For a moment, his words stunned the entire family. They stared at him as if he were a prophet of doom.

Steve recovered his first intent, though. “Good.” He threw the word at Taylor like a knife. “You stay. We’re gone.” Then to his family: “Come on. In the car. Let’s go.

They all piled into the station wagon with varying degrees of reluctance, fear, and confusion. Diane was relieved that Steve was taking control of the situation, though she wasn’t sure this messenger from Tangina should be dismissed out of hand. Steve, for his part, wasn’t really thinking at all; he just wanted to get the hell out of there. Robbie was actually kind of excited about the whole thing, now that they were out of the house.

And Carol Anne looked at Taylor with a curious smile. She liked that man; she didn’t know why. She felt almost like she knew him from someplace, though; she just couldn’t remember where.

She gave him a little wave out the back window of the car.

Taylor waved back.

Steve started the car with an untuned rumble, pulled out of the driveway, and screeched off down the street into the night.

* * *

An hour down I-10 going west, they pulled into an all-night roadside diner. They sat at a booth by the window, ordered chocolate sundaes for the little kids and coffee for themselves, and stared silently into their own thoughts.

It was finally Robbie who spoke first. “Are we gonna move again, Dad?”

That was, of course, everyone’s question—resolve themselves to an over-the-shoulder life of half-ignored fears, half-repressed memories,

ready to pick up and run every few years? Every time it found them? Whatever *it* was?

Everyone looked at Steve.

"Well, son . . . I don't know." He sighed at the admission and tried to include them all in what he perceived as his own private loss of will. "I guess . . . we'll have to think about it."

Diane didn't want to leave, now that the first flush of fright was past. This was no sterile tract house of Sheetrock and PVC; this was her mother's *home. Diane's* home. They couldn't just . . . walk away. "Where can we go?" she demanded.

"Disneyland!" suggested Carol Anne.

"Don't be such an infant," Robbie scolded her.

"Then how about Knott's Berry Farm?" Carol Anne goaded her brother. She hated it when he tried to act like an adult. She didn't ever want to be an adult. Adults died and got scary.

"Okay, you two, settle down," warned Diane. She had enough to think about without monitoring *them.* She took all the change from her purse and handed it over. "Here, go play the videos."

The kids ran off to the other end of the diner, leaving Steve and Diane to sort it out.

"Steven, what *are* we going to do?"

"I'm thinking," he lied. He was wallowing.

Behind them, at the counter, sat two overweight, T-shirted, redneck women, the younger one in hair curlers, the older one in her cups. "You're just a pack o' trouble, Momma," the younger one was saying. "Why you messin' around with that bum is beyond me."

"Cuz I likes him, that's why," replied her sullen momma.

Diane tried to ignore their rising voices. "Steven," she said, taking his hand across the table, "we've got to go *somewhere.* We can't just drive around."

Steve was feeling trapped.

The woman in hair curlers stood, saying to the other, "Well, Momma, don't be bringin' him to *my* house. That's all *I* can say." Then she turned and, without any preliminary, walked directly over to Steve and Diane. She spoke softly, and her voice changed character completely. It was Jess's voice. "Listen, children," it said, "you can't run from this thing. It has made contact with you and will stop at nothing. You must fight him head-on. Stay together. Be loving. Be brave."

Diane turned pale. "Mom?!" she whispered.

The woman suddenly shivered, blinked, and looked at Diane as if seeing her for the first time.

"Mom?" Diane said again.

The woman made a face. "What? I ain't your mom, lady." Her voice was pure redneck again.

"You okay, Elspeth?" shouted the older lady from the counter.

"Yeah, I guess," said the younger. The two of them left, looking back at the Freelings as if perhaps the police ought to be called.

"I need a drink," said Steve, and signaled the waitress.

He finished the beer quickly, neither of them talking. Then, in the cold light of the mercury lamps, they all walked out to the parking lot. Parked next to their station wagon was a battered blue pickup truck; sitting on the bumper of the truck was Taylor.

"What do *you* want?" Steve said suspiciously.

Taylor nodded toward the diner. "She told you the truth."

"Who?" Diane came up quickly. "You mean those two women?"

"You in cahoots with that girl?" Steve accused angrily.

"I don't cahoot with anyone." Taylor smiled.

"Is that right? Then why are you following us?"

"I came to help."

"We don't want your damn help!" Steve exploded. "We don't want anyone's help! We just want to be left alone!" He was near hitting the man, just to have something to do.

Diane sensed this and wanted to defuse it before Steve got himself into something else he couldn't handle. Besides, she felt an intuitive trust for this Taylor, and she was desperate to trust. "Steve, please . . . calm down now, honey . . ."

"Please what?" Steve clenched and unclenched his fists. "Maybe it's no coincidence that this guy shows up when everything starts getting funny again." Steve distrusted himself totally now, distrusted his ability to reason, to cope, to act, and so he naturally distrusted everyone else. "Now, get in the car, Diane."

Diane spoke to Taylor, though. "Why did Tangina send you? Why didn't she come herself?"

"My kind of job." Taylor shrugged. "When you have a special problem, you call a specialist."

"Diane, this is ridiculous," Steve said in the staccato tone he used when he had to try to substitute the force of his voice for the force of conviction. "Now, come on—"

“Steve, let’s try to handle this sensibly,” Diane pressed.

“Sensibly!” he rasped. “What’s sensible about anything that’s happened? Nobody can help us, Diane.” This is how he felt—beyond help. “I want to get out of here—now.” His voice was taking on a surly edge.

“And go where?” Diane shouted, near her own breaking point. She knew Steve had nowhere to go. “Steve, it followed us here. It will follow us anywhere we go.” She squeezed his arm to make him understand. “We can’t keep running.”

Steve looked up to see Carol Anne, Robbie, and E. Buzz standing beside the impassive Taylor. They’d cast their votes. And their sad faces bespoke an eloquence Steve couldn’t answer, for all his anger and shame.

Ninety minutes later, in the gray hour of the wolf, they stood once more in their own front yard, staring mutely, uncertainly, at the big family house on Grover Lane.

The haunted house.

They sat on the front lawn as the sun came up and for another hour besides as Taylor went through the house, room by room—to explore, to sense, to fathom.

The living room felt safe at its core, though its closets twisted back into bottomless unknowns. The kitchen was warm, the dining room neutral. Upstairs he was drawn to Jess’s room: clear, untroubled. He closed his eyes and envisioned the spirit who had resided here: it was the woman he’d seen beyond the Canyon of Shadows, the woman who’d gone into the Light—the one who’d wanted to protect the young girl. Taylor instantly understood that this woman’s presence, in life, *had* protected the young girl. Now, with her spirit gone Beyond, the girl was in danger. This was the reason the Beast had been able to enter the house.

He checked out the bathroom—a dangerous place, full of omens. He walked into the master bedroom: a trace of evil lingered here, as if the Thing had recently been by and left its scent.

He almost lost his balance on entering the children’s room—it reeked that much.

The children’s room was obviously where the Evil One had made its lair.

Finally he walked around the back yard, around the garden. This was the center of harmony of the house, the place where the patterns were unmarred. He walked under an arbor of grapes and let its serene

beauty give him sustenance. Here he would make his camp.

When he returned to the front yard again, to the Freelings, he was smiling—this house wasn't clean, but it was defensible.

E. Buzz barked happily at him, wagging his tail.

"It's okay?" said Diane, standing up. "You're sure?"

"E. Buzz agrees." Taylor smiled. "It's okay for now."

Everyone entered the house except Steve and Taylor. Steve was skeptical.

"Great." He nodded. "The *dog* agrees. That's terrific."

Taylor understood that Steve had to feel superior in some way, and he didn't mind being a laughingstock for a while. It was good to laugh. The man did well to keep in practice.

Still, Taylor could see he would have to do much to help this man in spite of himself, until the man's spirit awoke.

"Your car . . ." said Taylor tentatively.

"Yeah?" said Steve.

"It's very angry."

"Uh-huh," said Steve.

"I'll fix it," Taylor volunteered.

"Make it happy?" Steve goaded.

"Uh-huh." Taylor smiled.

They were humoring each other.

After about an hour of phone calls, Diane finally succeeded in tracking down Tangina Barrons at a boardinghouse in Hollywood.

She had let the phone ring about ten times, actually, and was about to hang up when a man's voice answered, speaking Spanish.

"Oh . . . I'm sorry . . ." said Diane. "I must have the wrong number." Then, on a second thought: "Is . . . Tangina Barrons there?"

"*Momento*," said the voice, followed by a rhythmic scrape-and-silence for a minute—Diane could almost see the receiver dangling from a wall phone in a dark corridor, swinging slowly back and forth, brushing the wall at the end of each pass.

At last another voice came on the line. A familiar voice. "This is Tangina."

"Tangina!" Diane breathed, at once relieved and concerned. "Are you . . . all right?"

The smile in Tangina's voice was audible. "I'm fine, Diane. That was

just the . . . concierge."

Diane laughed. "You recognized me."

"Well—I kind of expected you'd be callin'."

"Then you *did* send Taylor." Diane relaxed.

"Well . . . I directed him to where you're livin'. Nobody *sends* Taylor anywhere. He just follows his dreams."

"Well, he just showed up on our doorstep last night as we were on our way . . ." She paused. "They're back, Tangina."

"I know, child. I've been havin' dreams, too. I'd have come to you myself, but I'm . . . not up to par, you might say."

"What is it?" Diane's concern filled her voice. "Is there something I can—"

"You just tend to your own, child. The Beast knows what scares you, but you've got strengths it can't understand. And Taylor's a good man. Trust him."

"Yes, I do . . . I think. And *you* may deny it, but *he* says you sent him, and if he values *you* as a reference, I'm sure he can't be all bad . . ."

"Just don't get upset if he wants to put pieces of bark or shells or such all around your pretty carpets."

Diane laughed lightly. "Yes, well, he seems very different . . ."

Steve, overhearing this as he fixed himself a beer, looked through the kitchen window to the back yard, where Taylor was playing with Robbie and Carol Anne beside the tent he'd erected. A tent marked with strange designs, hung with claws and feathers. Steve dead panned to Diane: "Oh, he's *very* different. I'd say."

Diane tried to ignore him as she finished up on the phone. "Right, Tangina. Well, I can't say *Steve* really trusts him fully just yet . . . but I can't really blame him, I guess . . ."

"Steve has to learn to trust *himself fast,*" said Tangina. "But I'm in no position to give him instruction in *that* little trick." Her voice had suddenly become sardonic, almost self-abusive. "Well, I gotta go, honey. Good luck to you. If anyone can help you, Taylor can."

"Good-bye," said Diane, but before she could say more, Tangina hung up. Diane wondered if she'd ever see her again—she'd sounded so lost.

She walked over to Steve. "Let's give him a chance, Steve."

He looked put-upon. "Diane, I've read a lot of Indian books. I feel as bad as the next guy about Wounded Knee. I mean, I like Indians . . . but we don't know anything *about* this guy. What if he's just escaped

from the reservation, or jail, or the hospital, or—"

Diane interrupted his tirade by putting her hand on his arm and pointing out the window.

There, beside the tent, stood Taylor, alone. But not alone. For covering his body were hundreds of butterflies—delicately lighting, panting, fluttering. Conversing with him, it almost seemed. And he, in turn, stretched out his arms and moved in slow, regal circles around the arbor, as if he were dancing with a swarm of sprites.

Robbie and Carol Anne stared, enthralled, from the patio.

And then the butterflies dispersed and were gone.

As soon as Carol Anne lay down for her nap Robbie went out to Taylor's tent to talk man to man.

Taylor was sitting inside, cross-legged, encircled by his fetishes, when Robbie approached.

"Can I . . . come in?" Robbie asked uncertainly. This was about the coolest thing that had ever happened to him, and he didn't want to blow it. This guy was a *real Indian,* camping out in Robbie's backyard, making powerful medicine. Who could ever have believed it?

Taylor motioned him in, and they sat facing each other. A curved row of objects separated them in a line along the ground: a bobcat claw, a tiny doll woven out of buffalo grass, a shiny quartz crystal, an eagle feather, a piece of mountain sheep horn, a shard from an old obsidian lance tip, an uncut garnet, an armadillo scale.

Neither spoke for a moment, until Robbie figured he had to make the first move. "I was just wondering," he said, looking at Taylor straight on. "How'd you *do* that? With the butterflies, I mean."

Taylor smiled warmly. "There's no magic to it—except the magic of the universe, of course. It is hot in August, and butterflies need salt and water, like all creatures. They came to drink the sweat on my skin."

Robbie nodded, then shook his head. "They never landed on Dad like that, and sometimes he sweats a lot."

"They can sense fear, and quick uncertainties make them shy."

"Aren't you ever afraid?"

"Yes, I have fear. Fear is in the pattern of all things, part of the Great Harmony. The secret of riding fear is never to shut your eyes to it"

"Usually makes *my* eyes open *wider,"* said Robbie.

"The lonely often say so," remarked Taylor.

“I ain’t lonely,” Robbie protested defensively.

“You are quick to renounce praise,” said Taylor. “I mark loneliness an honor.”

“You *do*?” Robbie hardly believed him.

“All Navajos do. The Navajo *seeks* loneliness in all the corners of the Fifth World, which we now inhabit. Loneliness is a mantle of power and knowledge. The eagle is lonely, and there is no animal more beautiful or sacred or powerful.”

Robbie was becoming entranced by this wise man’s quiet, sure ways. “Well . . . maybe I am a *little* lonely.”

“Then perhaps you are a little Navajo. This is good. The Navajo are strong warriors. You must use your strength to help your family,” Taylor cautioned, “as will I.”

“Sure is lucky for us you came along when you did,” Robbie marveled.

“There is no luck.” Taylor smiled benevolently. “There is only the Pattern—the harmonious order of things—and the Kachina spirits that help us to see this order, and Evil, which is a disruption of this order, and Ceremony, which helps us restore the pattern.”

“Right,” said Robbie. Then: “What’s Kachina?”

“Kachinas are our Ancestor Spirits. They live in the clouds.”

“Mom says *I’m* off in the clouds a lot.”

“Then you have been close to the Kachinas—perhaps you are brother to the Hopi as well as to the Navajo.”

“Really?”

“I am blood kin to both tribes. This has made me special, though some scorn me for my specialness. You, too, are these things: special and scorned. I feel this.”

Robbie nodded. He felt it, too.

Taylor continued. “So you are brother to me in spirit—and, as brothers, we must share each other’s battles. Who offends you offends me. Perhaps it was because of this that the Evil One came to my attention.”

“The Evil One?”

“He who would steal your sister from this world. It is he you must struggle against—but you are not alone in this, and I am confident we will win.”

“Yeah? How?” Robbie was less than confident—he’d seen this Evil One’s power. Maybe Taylor hadn’t.

“We start with prayer.” He closed his eyes, lifted his face upward, hummed a powerful, atonal melody, and spoke to the heavens: “Hear me, Kachinas. This boy, whose spirit lives with you in the clouds and who harbors the loneliness of the Navajo within him, would seek your counsel and assistance in helping him ward off this Evil, which surrounds his family, which is in disharmony. Hear me and come.”

He held his arms outstretched, up toward the sky, and indicated that Robbie should do the same. Robbie did so, with an expression of awe and total dedication.

Steve saw them like that as he walked from the garage to the front yard—saw them and felt momentarily annoyed. Robbie had never looked at *him* that way. He said nothing, though, and strode off.

When Taylor finished his silent supplications he brought his arms down, motioning Robbie to follow. Then, with great moment, he said, “Are you ready now? To do battle with the Evil One?”

Robbie nodded solemnly.

“Good. First we must give you a new name—a name to be called, so the power of your true name is not revealed to our enemy. A person’s true name is sacred and should be spoken only rarely.”

“The power of my true name—you mean Robbie?”

Taylor nodded, his lips curving down.

“You mean Taylor’s not *your* true name?” the boy asked in wonder.

Taylor shook his head, his lips curving down again.

“Well, what’ll we call me?”

Taylor stared at Robbie’s gaping mouth, filled with orthodontic hardware. “From this day,” said Taylor, “you are Iron Jaw.”

“Wow,” said Robbie, moved. Then, even more quietly: “What’s *your* true name, Taylor?”

“Second,” said Taylor, “we must get you the proper totems.” He picked up the quartz crystal and the armadillo scale. “These I give you as gifts—though you will always draw your greatest strength from the things you find or champion or make your own. But these fetishes will be your first, and there is a power in that, too.” Robbie took them ceremoniously as Taylor continued. “The stone is a pecos diamond—it holds light of many colors, and such beauty is a harmonious thing. The other is the scale of an armadillo—it will protect you . . . when I cannot.”

Robbie stared at his gifts, wide-eyed. “Awesome,” he whispered.

“And finally,” said Taylor, “we will annoint you in the Battle Ceremony.” He pulled a jar of pigmented dye from his knapsack.

“War paint!” Iron Jaw said, beaming.

Yes. He was ready.

When Diane showed up at the tent an hour later carrying a plate full of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, she was rather upset to find that not only was Robbie’s face painted with sinister green and white designs, but his Louisville Slugger baseball bat, sitting across his lap, had snakes and symbols carved all over it.

“What’s this?” she asked in as neutral a tone as she could muster.

“Hi, Mom!” Robbie answered quickly, hoping to forestall the inevitable. “I’m gonna help protect the family.”

Diane set down the sandwiches. “Go inside and wash your face.”

“Hey, I can handle this and—”

“And I’m still your mother. Go inside and wash—*now,* mister.”

“Thanks, Mom.” He exited, embarrassed *for* her more than *by* her.

Taylor gazed quietly at Diane. “He wants to be a man.”

“There are lots of ways to be a man,” said Diane. “I’m not sure wearing war paint is one of them.” She didn’t like war or violence.

“How would you know?” he asked politely.

“What?”

“You are not a man, are you?”

“Okay, I’m not a man,” she admitted, “but you’re not a mother. It’s my job to do everything I can to make my children part of a normal world—a world of school and friends and lovers, and families of their own someday.”

“That’s good.” Taylor nodded. He approved, but he didn’t understand the division Diane was making.

His easy agreement flustered her. “Right.” She halted. “I know. And I hope they’ll learn to forget all this soon.”

“They cannot learn by forgetting.”

His sophistry angered her. “And what would you have me do? They’re children, for God’s sake.”

“Children have fought wars,” said Taylor, as if he were explaining something to a child. “They have built nations. They are strong and have courage. Don’t patronize them because they’re young.”

“I *protect* them because they’re young,” she corrected.

He tried to make her understand. “Children have special powers. They have a magic that most adults lose. Because children don’t act against their natures. They are like warriors in this way. Only

'civilized' adults, who have learned to fear themselves, need fear the kind of Evil that now covets your spirits."

"Now that's what I'm talking about," she scolded like a mom. "That kind of talk. It's just not part of the normal kind of world I want my kids to grow up in."

"What you want has little to do with what is 'normal.' In my world, normality includes demons and beasts. In your world also, I suspect. No, I don't suspect—I *know*. We all have beasts to conquer."

"With a baseball bat?" She tried sarcasm, but her heart wasn't in it.

"With whatever we have," he assured her.

"Well, what I have is my love for my children."

"And that is your greatest strength. Never lose it."

"I . . . won't." Again she was disarmed by his concurrence.

"But the universe is a wide place, with many paths. We each take a different path, though we may go to the same place—and these paths cross like the colored threads in a rug, weaving a beautiful pattern. Only when a thread leaves its shuttle to join the path of another is the pattern upset. So we each must remain on our own thread, in its own place. Your place is in the love of your family. Mine is in the way of the warrior. Your husband, I think, still seeks his thread." He took her hand, looked at her fingers. "Your hand is strong, though—you can hold much together."

She felt suddenly moved by his reassurance, by the poetry in his words and in his soul. And quite against her wishes, tears came to her eyes.

That was the scene Steve saw from the corner of the house: Taylor and Diane holding hands, Diane moved to tears. That, on top of the trouble he was having with the car, was just the last damn straw. He came storming up to them, sweating, dirty, and distinctly displeased. "Okay, Taylor . . . you can stay in this house . . . you can have my aura, my spirit, my ghosts. But leave my car *alone*. Okay? Hands off! It's worse than before."

"Car's still angry?" Taylor shrugged, then nodded. "Sometimes it gets worse before it gets better." He waited a moment, then spoke more softly. "Sometimes everything does."

That night Taylor sat in the backyard, looking up at the stars, trying to find strength in their patterns.

This was a difficult family to help. There were none so blind, his paternal great-grandmother used to tell him, as those who would not see.

As if in answer to this thought, Steve approached and sat at the picnic table. He was drinking tequila straight from the bottle; it was blinding him further, though endowing him, at least temporarily, with a generosity of spirit he was incapable of when sober.

He took a long swig and offered the bottle to Taylor. “Whew! Ta kill ya,” he joked.

Taylor shook his head politely. “Used to drink. Bad dreams. I gave it up.”

Steve shrugged. Taylor probably had a drinking problem, he figured. Too bad; it was good medicine. Helped you forget what you didn’t want to remember.

He took another swallow and forgot something else.

Taylor continued staring at the sky.

Steve said, “See somethin’?”

“No,” said Taylor. He wasn’t looking to see; he was looking to feel.

“Well, uh . . . what’re you doin’, then?”

“Seeking power,” said Taylor.

Steve held his bottle high, letting the starlight glitter through its golden shadows. “Me, too,” he said, and took another long swallow. The worm at the bottom of the bottle bounced along the undercurrents. “They say a real man drinks to the last drop—only a chicken’s afraid of swallowing the worm.”

“It is a strange measure of cowardice and bravery, I think.”

“Yeah, well—I save the worm for breakfast.” He tried to impress the Indian with false bravado. “Hair of the dog that bit ya, I always say.” He smiled what he supposed was a brash smile and chugged again at the bottle in what he supposed was a devil-may-care manner.

Taylor smiled sadly at him. “You feel like a leaf at the mercy of the wind, don’t you?”

Steve was taken off guard. He first impulse was to wisecrack; but something about the stars and Taylor’s voice and the liquor and the strain made him feel suddenly melancholy and open to his own truths. “Yeah, I do, sorta,” he said softly to the ground.

“Since the day you were born, one way or another, someone has been doing something to you.”

Now his feelings suddenly flip-flopped, and he became annoyed at this dime-store Indian for making him feel weak. “Hey, I don’t know about that,” he protested.

“And they have been doing something to you against your will. And by now you’re helpless, like a leaf in the wind.”

Steve was confused. It was the tequila making him sluggish. “Hey, Chief—why don’t you say what’s on your mind so I can understand it.”

“You understand,” Taylor replied with the patience of the earth. “No matter how much you like to feel sorry for yourself, you have to change that.” He locked eyes with Steve in order to make him hear. “I am a warrior. A warrior would rather be defeated and die than act against his nature. You are here with me because you *want* to be here. You should assume full responsibility.”

“Responsibility for what?” The Indian was beginning to sound like his wife.

“Everything in your world,” said Taylor. “Everything. Your thoughts, your children, your drinking, your house, this tree, this table, the stars—it’s all alive and part of you, and you are part of *it.* Part of the pattern.”

“Okay, I’m responsible for the stars,” Steve said glibly. “What am I supposed to do about it?”

“Ceremonies help.” Taylor spoke with a knowledgeable flatness, but he was getting peeved by this fool’s disrespect.

“Ceremonies,” said Steve. “I gotta say I’m not much into ceremonies.”

“You are irresponsible, then,” Taylor reprimanded. “Warriors and Wise Ones know their own natures, which are contained in the nature of all things, and they perform ceremonies to preserve this order.”

Steve was feeling sullen in the shadow of this pompous, imperious Indian. He raised his bottle slightly. “I do okay with *this* little ceremony. Maybe you oughta stop yours and try mine.”

Taylor sighed. “If the ceremonies stopped, the world would come to an end.”

Robbie was in his room practicing sitting cross-legged when Carol Anne entered to get her toy phone and guardian angel doll, Katrina, to take downstairs to the makeshift collective bedroom Diane was setting up in the den.

“Supposed to come downstairs to sleep *now,”* Carol Anne said to him on her way out the door. When he ignored her, she paused and said, “*Robbie . . .*”

“From now on, call me Iron Jaw,” he ordered.

“Robbie, come *on,”* she said, trying to sound like Mom. “And Mom says don’t forget to clean your braces.”

"Yeah, okay, okay." He glowered at her.

"Don't 'okay' me," she said in a snit, leaving the room.

Robbie gave her a parting shot—"You little pest"—and went into the bathroom. He walked past the mirror over the sink, sticking his head out the door to make certain Carol Anne wasn't around.

And in that moment a dozen ghoulish faces stared out at him from the depths of the mirror.

But when he turned back to the looking glass, the faces were gone.

He opened his mouth at his own reflection, grimacing at his braces, picking at them here and there, his face inches from the glass. That's when he saw, in the mirror, the bony, rotting hand come up behind him and grab for his shoulder.

He yelled as he whirled . . . and Carol Anne jumped back; it was only she standing behind him.

"Don't do that, jerko!" he snapped at her. She was really being a royal pain.

"I didn't do anything, tinsel-teeth!" she retorted. She was still scared from his turning on her so fast. "Anyway, Mom says you're supposed to hurry up."

Robbie just gave her a look, so she left again and went downstairs.

Downstairs it was like a sleepover—pillows and blankets on the floor, paper plates on the furniture.

Taylor wanted them all to sleep down here; Carol Anne was glad.

Diane tucked her in next to the couch, right beside Katrina, and kissed her good night.

"Good night, sweetheart."

"G'night, Mom."

"Where's Robbie?"

She shrugged with supreme disinterest. "He's still playing up in the bathroom. Says he's coming." She decided to do Robbie a favor and not tell Mom about him wanting to be called Iron Jaw. "Kiss Katrina, too." Diane kissed the doll good night. "Good night, girls."

"Taylor says Katrina is really Kachina, and that's why she'll protect me, because Kachina is a spirit from the sky, and I have my own special one, and this is her."

"Honey, I'm sure Taylor means well, and I know this is your special doll, but just don't get carried away, okay?"

"Carried away?" Carol Anne looked worried.

"No . . . no . . . that was a bad choice of words. What I mean is . . .

Katrina's a nice name, but that's all."

"*Kachina*, Mom. This is *her.*"

"This is *she,*" Diane corrected.

"Yeah!" Carol Anne was glad her mother finally got it

Steve entered from the garden, bottle in hand, staring at Taylor, who still sat in the middle of the yard, watching the heavens.

Diane yelled upstairs. "Robbie—brush - your - teeth -and- get - down - here in - five - minutes—it's - time - for - bed - and - I'm - not - going - to - say - it again!"

"Okay, okay, I'm coming!" he shouted back from his room, as if to say it should have been obvious to anyone but a certified mother that he was on the very verge of the way down.

Suddenly Carol Anne sat up, looked at her toy phone as if it had just rung, and picked up the receiver.

Diane looked at her suspiciously. "Now don't *you* start, young lady, just because your brother . . ."

Carol Anne wasn't listening to her mother, though. She was listening to the phone. "Okay," she said tentatively into the mouthpiece, then held the receiver out at arms's length toward her father. "Dad . . ." she began.

Steve turned toward her.

Diane turned toward her.

In the backyard, Taylor turned toward her—for he'd heard something, too.

Carol Anne looked at her father with a scared and curious tilt of the head. "It's for you," she said.

Steve smiled and took the phone from her, eager to play a brief child's game with his daughter before bedtime. "Hello . . ." he said gaily.

There was a moment of silence, and then a voice blasted out so loudly—from the phone, from the very substance of the house—that a neighbor two doors down glanced out his window and hoped this wasn't the beginning of a raucous party.

It was no party, though.

The voice bellowed: "I . . . am . . . not . . . dead!"

CHAPTER 4

Steve slammed the phone down on its hook; Carol Anne began to cry; and Diane held her, comforted her. Taylor, in the garden, chanted.

Only Robbie didn't hear the voice. He was up in the bathroom, with the door to the hallway shut. And the voice didn't want to be heard in the bathroom.

Robbie was staring in the mirror, fiddling with his braces, trying to cover them with his finger, to see what he might look like without the hardware, when for no apparent reason the door from the bathroom to his bedroom slammed shut.

Couldn't have been the wind; he knew he'd closed the windows. Couldn't have been Carol Anne; she was downstairs.

He suddenly wished he had his Louisville Slugger Hopi Snake Priest baseball bat with him, but it was in his bedroom, and the door to that room was now closed, as was the door to the hall.

He felt something in his mouth. He looked into the mirror again.

His braces were coming alive.

Alive and writhing.

And before he could move, he watched them send steely tendrils from his teeth out of his mouth, to spread onto his face—clutching his jaws together.

He gasped in horror, tried to scream, but all that came out was a muted squeal.

He tried to open the door to the hall, but it wouldn't open.

He tried to open his mouth, but it was clamped even more tightly shut.

He looked in the mirror again. The braces were wrapping around the back of his head like iron roots.

He ripped at them, tore his nails, screamed a muffled scream.

Steve and Diane heard it.

Anguished beyond expression, they raced up the stairs, down the hall to the closed bathroom door—to Robbie's shrill whining.

"We're coming, Robbie!" shouted Diane.

Steve tried the door. It wouldn't open.

"Steven!" Diane wailed.

He slammed his shoulder into the door. And again. And again.

Diane lent her weight to it. Robbie's screams were getting softer.

Steve was shaking from the exertion, but he pushed his body still harder against the wood. He would not lose his son the way he'd almost lost his daughter—by God, he would not.

And once more, harder . . . and the door splintered open, tumbling Steve and Diane into the bathroom.

What they saw momentarily stopped them, for it was even more bizarre than it was horrible.

For there was Robbie, pinned to the ceiling, nearly strangulating and completely enmeshed by a mass of curling, twisting wires. Like a crawling vine of braces.

One of his eyes was still visible through the tangle—wild, gaping—and one arm was still free. He reached down toward his stunned parents, but was caught short as a tentacle of wires tightened around his throat.

Steve lunged for his son's outstretched hand, but the meshwork latched onto the man's wrist, bodily lifting him from the floor. It felt electric where it touched his skin, but also putrid and somehow . . . muscular. He'd never been grabbed by anything so strong.

"Get Taylor!" he shouted to Diane. If nothing else, the Indian was big—bigger than Steve—and clearly quite strong. Maybe the two of them, pulling . . .

Diane ran to the top of the stairs and called down frantically. "Taylor! Help us! For God's sake, hurry! Please!!"

No response. She ran down the stairs—far enough to see down. What she saw was Taylor sitting calmly, stoically, in the den, unmoving, with Carol Anne in his lap. Carol Anne was whimpering. Taylor seemed to be ignoring both the girl's cries and Diane's pleas.

Diane raced back up to the bathroom to find Steve and Robbie both inextricably entwined in the filamentous net, as if some alien spider had rolled them into its web.

Not only that; cobralike, a cable of wires was beginning to grope toward the electrical outlet.

At that moment the handles blew off the faucets, sending geysers of water over the family, the room, and the maniac braces, drenching everything, making electrical conductivity immediate, certain, and lethal.

"Taylor!" screamed Diane. But then it was too late.

The thing shoved one of its frayed prongs into the outlet.

There was a flurry of sparks—blue, white, yellow—and a shock wave that seemed to shake the room, shake the air, shake their bones to the marrow and deeper.

And then it was gone—the wire mesh, the writhing tentacles—and the three of them were lying soaking wet on the floor.

There was a moment of demented laughter, an insane noise, the sound of babies shrieking . . . and then that, too, was gone. And it was all over.

For the time being.

Robbie started to cry. He was feeling scared and unnaturally mortal for one so young; he was afraid he'd let everyone down as well. Iron Jaw had backfired.

Steve hugged him, and Diane, too. And then they went downstairs to confront Taylor.

"Where the hell were *you*?" Steve almost spat in his face as Diane took Carol Anne into her arms and hugged her as close as possible. "We're not safe here!" Steve continued. "My son almost died up there, while you . . . just *sat* here." He almost took a shot at the big phony, sitting there so smug . . .

"Steve . . ." Diane sensed the imminent explosion and tried to calm him.

"What," whispered Steve. He was furious, he was terrified, he wanted to hit something, anything . . .

Taylor spoke, though—evenly, yet strongly: "I was protecting the child. It was *she* the thing was after—not your son, or your wife, or you."

Steve, totally frustrated and knowing suddenly that what Taylor said was true—the Indian had, in fact, saved Carol Anne from the same kind of horrible disappearance she'd suffered four years ago—sat down hard in an overstuffed chair and shouted, nearly crying, "What does this thing want from us!?"

He was all at once thrown out of the chair and across the room. The cushions he'd been sitting on expanded and contracted as if they were breathing; then there was the decayed laugh again that seemed to come from everywhere; and then, once more, silence.

Carol Anne and Robbie both began to cry. Diane drew them into her arms, took them to the farthest corner, and put them to sleep.

Later, Diane stepped out into the backyard for some air. It was chilly, as is the way with desert places at night, so she wrapped her arms around herself as she stared up at the sky.

The constellation Orion was there—the Hunter, poised over the house; protectively, Diane hoped. How many eons had this star man been waiting there? And for this night, perhaps? To plunge his starry knife into the heart of Diane's foes?

She smiled at the fanciful turn of her thoughts—Taylor's mysticism was beginning to get to her. In fact, Taylor himself . . . was that him? "Taylor?" she said. There'd been a noise behind her. She turned.

Nothing there.

Not even the dog, or a night bird. Nothing. It gave her an uneasy feeling.

"Steven?" she said a bit louder. He played little tricks on her like this sometimes to scare her.

But he wouldn't tonight.

"Taylor?" she whispered again.

The noise came once more, this time obviously low, near the ground. She looked down just as the hand grabbed her ankle.

It was a moldering hand, the flesh decayed on the bone, sticking straight up out of the earth, holding viciously on to her lower leg. She pulled back hard, reflexively, and the hand lost its grip as some of its decayed skin was torn loose.

But suddenly two more hands shot up out of the ground, one grabbing her foot, another her calf. And the first gripped her ankle once more.

She squirmed, gasping, trying to wriggle free, but it was happening so fast—four more hands now, all grave-rotten, grasping both her legs in the soft, loose dirt.

And they started pulling her down.

Underground.

A little yelp escaped her lips. Her energy wasn't focused on screaming, though—simply on trying to break free. But in a second she'd sunk to her knees in the churning soil, and a second after that she was up to her waist.

It was like quicksand, but worse. And the deeper she was pulled, the more hands she felt on her—on her legs, her hips, her belt, her wrists—pulling her deeper still, pawing at her, tearing at her, wrapping around her and squeezing the air out of her so she *couldn't* scream.

Up to her chest. Hands latched on to her shoulders.

Up to her neck.

She looked up for one last glimpse of Orion—he hadn't moved a muscle—and felt fingers grabbing her jaw, her hair, the top of her

head . . .

And she was gone; sucked into the earth.

And then the ground sewed back together above her, every blade of grass in place. So there wasn't the slightest sign anything had just happened, except for Diane's muffled chokings, now a few feet down.

Diane sat up with a wrenching gasp on the floor of the den as Steve shook her awake.

"Diane . . . Diane . . . you were just having a dream. It's okay now," he was saying. "You're okay. It's all over now."

She let her head rest on his shoulder, let herself wake up slowly, though she knew with certainty it wasn't *just* a dream. And far from being all over . . . it was just beginning.

Still later, in hushed tones, Taylor discussed the situation with the people whose home he'd made it his pledge to guard.

Motioning to Carol Anne, now finally sleeping, he said to Diane, "He feels she belongs to him."

"Why?" rasped Diane. Why this innocent child, who'd never harmed a soul?

"I'm not sure," Taylor answered, "but he is used to getting what he wants."

"Is he a man?" Steve wanted to know. "Or a beast?" Tangina had called him the Beast, though Steve had never understood exactly what that meant.

"He is a man filled with the demon, lost in a dimension that surrounds our world." Taylor spoke as explicitly as possible, describing *concepts* with *words*—an endeavor that worked only approximately, at best. "This entity believes that our world and his are the same. But his world is . . . a continuing nightmare. It is a land where the dead live. A land we may reach through *our* nightmares."

"Doesn't he know he's dead." Diane demanded.

"But he isn't," said Taylor.

"But you just said—"

"Nothing truly dies, the way you understand it." He searched for words, for ways of explaining multiple existences to these kind people, who believed in only five senses. "As a caterpillar becomes a butterfly," he spoke slowly, "death transforms us into another state of being. This man—he was evil in life, and his soul remains evil because he chooses not to see the Light and pass on to a different consciousness."

Steve was lost. He just wanted some marching orders. "How do we fight back?" he said.

"An old woman lived here until a short time ago. She has passed on into the Light now."

"My mother," whispered Diane.

"I would offer my sympathies," Taylor said warmly, "but what does the caterpillar know of the butterfly? No matter—when she was here, her spirit was protecting your child. With her . . . aura. Now that she has gone beyond the Light, the Beast is emboldened—he feels safe in entering our world again. To try to make the child his own."

"How do we fight back?" Steve repeated. He didn't want theology; he wanted strategy.

Taylor's massive shoulders slumped an inch. "Until we learn how to defeat him, we do not let him win."

"Some plan," scoffed Steve, not without bitterness.

Diane turned it around on Steve. "Some attitude," she leveled at his unhelpful cynicism.

"Don't give me that!" he snapped at her.

Taylor interrupted strongly. "Do not betray each other now," he warned. "This is the vapor of the Beast washing within you like a tide. It is *he,* speaking *through* you. His spirit is evil but very wise—do not fool yourself that evil is ignorant. He knows that your strength is your love, and he hates you for that, because he knows not love, nor has he been touched by love for two hundred years or more. His spirit swells on hate. He has been trying to pull this family apart, and he will continue to try." He looked from Steve to Diane. "If he succeeds, he will capture Carol Anne . . . and destroy your spirit."

The next morning Carol Anne and Robbie were playing on the front lawn when they heard the melody. It was an oddly pitched man's voice, at once lazy and intense, singing an old spiritual they'd never heard before. "He is in His Holy Temple," the voice sang. Or maybe Carol Anne *had* heard it before; she wasn't sure.

They looked up to see the man singing it as he walked nonchalantly along the front of the house. The man, too, looked familiar.

He was thin and wore a black, wide-brimmed hat, a black coat, black lace-up boots. He looked like a preacher.

Very deliberately, he turned up the Freelings' driveway.

The moment he did so, E. Buzz, who'd been sleeping on the front porch, woke up and began to bark. It started raining, though the sky

remained cloudless.

Henry Kane sang louder: "He is in His Holy Temple . . ." He approached Carol Anne on the grass as the dog growled angrily.

Robbie ran up onto the porch. "Come on, Carol Anne!" he called. He knew something was wrong, but he didn't know what.

Carol Anne didn't move. It was raining on her, but she seemed frozen to the spot, just staring at the gaunt preacher man who walked slowly closer.

Robbie shouted louder. "Carol Anne, is something wrong? Huh? It's *raining* Carol Anne, come on!"

Suddenly it burst out of her—a cry for help: "Mom! Dad!"

E. Buzz bared his fangs in fear. Steve and Diane ran out onto the porch, and their appearance seemed to break the spell Carol Anne was under—she bolted for the house just before the man reached her, and hugged her mom around the legs.

The man continued his leisurely pace up the drive, now whistling his hypnotic tune. He smiled, oblivious to the rain pouring down.

Diane felt goosebumps on her arm. She quickly ushered the children inside the house, then stood with them just behind the screen door. Steve remained out on the porch, watching the man with the measured gait come forward until they were face to face.

"Can I help you?" said Steve. He felt himself sweating—this guy gave him a bad feeling.

Diane stared out from behind the screen. "I've seen you somewhere before," she said.

"That is possible," said Kane. "I get around." He seemed to radiate a magnetic kind of energy, but his voice made Diane weak, almost nauseated—it was too high or something; and his eyes reminded her of damp moss. He said, "I love getting around. Love talking to people—even on a rainy day." He patted E. Buzz on the head as a gesture of friendship, but the dog jumped and yelped and ran away.

The man's fingernails came up full of dog hair, with a singed odor about them. "Dog's shedding," he mentioned conversationally. Then he saw Carol Anne half hiding behind her mother and the screen door. "Hi," he said kindly.

"Hi," Carol Anne choked out; but she was just as jumpy as the dog. She had no memory of this man's face, but her body registered its clear recollection.

And her spirit knew.

Diane finally remembered something. "I saw you at the mall."

The man smiled joyously. “Sure you did!” Like he was honored to be recalled. “I remember your little angel here.” He beamed graciously at them all. “Let me introduce myself. Henry Kane.” He extended his hand.

Carol Anne whimpered and hugged Diane closer. Steve kept his hand to himself—it was sweating so much, he didn’t really want to touch the guy. “We’ve had enough of door-to-door salesmen,” he began, and broke off. He was feeling a little sick himself.

Besides, he didn’t owe this guy any explanations or apologies. He just felt as if he wanted to lie down. He moved to the screen door and opened it; Kane followed him, coming up onto the porch, in out of the rain.

As Steve stood at the threshold, Kane spoke again. *“Reverend* Kane. What I sell is free. And Kane is able.” He smiled generously.

Steve stood just inside the house, the screen door open; Kane was on the porch outside, facing him. “Mind if I come in and talk to you about it?” he purred to Steve as he pulled the door open a little wider.

Steve heard Carol Anne behind him say, “Mom, I don’t feel good,” and on impulse he pulled the screen door shut, leaving Kane outside on the porch. Steve was not the most sensitive man on the planet, but he could hear when his own daughter was scared.

He looked at Kane across the screen. “Let’s talk from here,” he said quietly.

Diane felt Carol Anne’s forehead. “Come on, honey, I want to take your temperature,” she said. Then: “You come, too, Robbie.” She eyed Kane suspiciously once more, then hurried the kids away, feeling chilled despite the warm day.

Steve, on the other hand, was sweating more and more. Yellow spots swam across his peripheral visual field; he felt actually quite faint.

Kane smiled again, this time with an air of confidentiality, of things unspoken that must be spoken between men. “I am glad we’re able to talk with your family out of the way, because I believe you have a problem here.”

“Oh, yeah?” Steve took the challenge, but his conviction was thready.

“Yes,” said Kane with sincerity. “I believe there’s an Indian living here with you.”

“Taylor?” He couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“Is that what he calls himself now?” Kane wagged his head like a disappointed schoolteacher. Then, more concerned: “You are in

danger."

"What do you mean?" said Steve. He *did* feel in danger. Maybe this yo-yo knew what he was talking about.

Kane became righteous. "I am with an organization whose concern is families like yours—families in crisis who are preyed upon by charlatans with fake magic." His eyes widened and deepened, his nostrils flared in outrage. "I don't expect you to believe me right now"—his manner calmed to something more beatific—"but please let me come in and talk to you."

Kane reached for the door.

Steve held it closed. "This is getting crazy," he muttered.

Kane entreated. "Will you please, brother, open your heart? Open your heart and let me in . . ." His voice was becoming hypnotic.

Steve felt his eyes getting heavy.

"Open your mind and heart to what I am saying," Kane droned on. "Please, that man is *dangerous."* His voice rose at the end, with unexpected volume and feeling.

The change jolted Steve alert. "How do you know that?" he said.

Kane smiled thinly. "Because I'm smaaaaart . . ."

At that moment Diane, standing at the bedroom bureau looking for a thermometer, had a vision: Everything went black; she was suddenly in a blackened chamber, and then there was candlelight, and a multitude of desperate faces and hands reaching toward her, faces weeping, wailing, twisted with grief; and a man beside her, in a black coat and with eyes of moss, was saying, "Believe me, children, because I'm smaaaaart . . ."

And then the vision was gone. Diane's knees became rubbery, though, and she sat down hard at her bedroom vanity, sweating, shaking. Perhaps she should take her *own* temperature; she was feeling a little feverish.

And then it came again. A different vision: She stood at a cave mouth, looking out at a vast, bleached desert landscape. A hundred people were walking there, in a straggly line, wearing early-nineteenth-century clothes, walking and stumbling and parching under the desert sun. And at the head of the line, riding the only horse among them, was Henry Kane.

Again the vision dissipated, and Diane sat alone in her bedroom once more, trembling and afraid.

Downstairs, only a moment had passed; Kane was still speaking. "This Indian—his real name is Ben Lagou." The name came with difficulty to his tongue; he hated to utter it. "I can see he has a hold

on this family. Who do your wife and children turn to with their problems? They turn to him, don't they? They don't trust you anymore. I can help. Now, can I please come in and speak to you?"

His voice and his argument were compelling. He spoke openly of things Steve half suspected; he implied knowledge of much more.

Images flashed through Steve's mind: of Taylor and Robbie embracing, of Taylor and Diane touching. He wavered but held. "No," he gasped.

"He has fooled many people," Kane chided. "You do not know who he is"—innuendo filled his smile—"but your wife does."

Implications lay heavily upon Steve. "What do you mean by that?"

"Please," Kane begged. "Let me in."

"No," Steve shook his head. But he was hesitating.

"Now!" Kane commanded. "Before it's too late!" As if it were already too late, he began pushing open the door.

Steve didn't know what to think or feel or do, but he pushed the door shut somehow and even held it. It seemed to take all his strength to do so. "No," he whispered hoarsely, with his last energy.

"What kind of man are you?!" Kane snarled. "Your wife and that Indian . . . making a fool of you. Your children dote on him—they can't wait until you leave the house, they laugh about you, and then your wife and that big, bad Indian . . ."

Steve half slumped against the door, sweating, nearly fainting, his sheer weight holding it closed.

Kane yanked the door back and forth violently, but it wouldn't budge. He began screaming: "You're going to die in there! All of you! You're going to die!"

This jerked Steve out of his stupor, giving him new wind. He stood straight and shouted back, "Get the hell out of here! Get the hell away from my door!"

Kane looked startled a moment, then smiled slowly, calm once again. "Sorry to see you're still unconvinced," he said softly and with genuine regret.

Then he turned and stepped off the porch, back into the rain. "A pleasure visiting with you," he allowed.

He walked down the driveway, singing sweetly, "He is in His Holy Temple," and by the time he reached the street he seemed to have disappeared altogether.

And then, as suddenly as it had started, the rain vanished as well.

Steve leaned at the door a few seconds longer, still a bit stunned.

When he turned, finally, to retreat further into the house, he found Taylor standing behind him.

Taylor was grinning. “You did good,” he said.

“Why?” said Steve. “You know that guy? *He* seemed to know *you.”*

“That’s no guy,” said Taylor. “That’s *him.”*

“What are you talking about?” asked Steve. But he knew.

“It was a test of power,” Taylor confirmed. “He can come in other forms, but that was him.” He handed Steve an eagle feather. “Now you are hooked.” He smiled, walking toward his truck.

“Hooked?” Couldn’t this Indian ever talk plain American?

“You are on the path of a warrior.”

Steve stared in some perplexity at the eagle feather. “So what’s the story on this bird feather, anyway? And can’t you ever finish a conversation?”

Taylor stopped and turned. “Your confrontation with him was a drain on your power. He was testing you. You did good, but you must become stronger. The feather of the eagle is a good lightning rod for power—it will help you become stronger. But the Warrior’s Path is a long one, and we don’t have much time. Come. We must prepare.”

“Prepare what?” said Steve. But he followed Taylor out to the curb. Then, midway across the lawn, he stopped and shouted up at the house, “Diane!”

She stuck her head out the bedroom window. She still looked a little shaky. “Where are you going?”

“I’m going out with Taylor for a little while. Keep the doors locked, okay?”

“Do you have to go?” she said. She didn’t want to be alone.

Taylor answered her. “Yes,” he assured. “It is important.”

She nodded. “Don’t be long,” she added.

Steve and Taylor reached the blue pickup. Taylor got in, and Steve called up to Diane once more: “You okay?”

She smiled weakly and nodded once.

“Love you,” he called, and got in the car.

Taylor started the truck and revved the engine. “The most important thing you did”—he began the lesson—“was not to ask him in. Evil cannot claim you unless you ask it in to your heart.”

Steve raised one eyebrow, a little miffed. “So where were you with all this handy information when I could’ve used some backup?”

“In the end,” said Taylor, “you must fight your own battles with

your own resources." Then his face lost its sternness. "But in the beginning, too, I think."

He put the truck in gear and, burning oil to blue smoke, rattled off down the street.

* * *

The kids were napping quietly upstairs when Diane heard the knocking. She jumped and just stood in the kitchen for half a minute, motionless, listening. Like a deep thud, toward the front of the house . . . it happened again.

She froze; she didn't know what to do. It was the man in black again—she was sure of it—that unsettling, skeletal-looking . . . or maybe it was the supernatural knocking again, the noise that had driven them from the bouse last night, the rumbling, shaking . . .

But this wasn't that pervasive; this thumping was coming very specifically from the front of the house. From the front door, in fact.

Knock, knock.

She should really go look, at least, to see what it was. Steve would want to know. Taylor might need to know. She picked at a cuticle. She checked the back door to make sure it was locked.

She walked to the front door.

The knocking returned. Diane seized her courage, opened the viewing latch in the door, and peered out. The knocking stopped.

No one there.

The knocking returned.

"Who is it?" Diane whispered.

A voice said: "It's me—Tangina."

Diane pulled the door wide and looked down; there, below the viewing field of the peephole, was Tangina Barrons—dwarf and psychic extraordinaire.

"Tangina!" Diane exclaimed, ushering her in and stooping to hug her all in one motion.

"Sorry to come unannounced, sweetie," said Tangina, "but I need to speak with you."

"I'm so glad you're here," whispered Diane, choking back tears. This woman of small stature and grand spirit had saved them four years ago—saved Carol Anne from the horrors of the void, saved the entire family from destruction by the Beast. Diane was glad with all her heart that Tangina was there, and she prayed that the insanity was over now.

“I’m glad you’re glad,” said Tangina. “Because we’re running out of time.”

CHAPTER 5

Tangina Barrons was hanging on by her fingernails at the end of a rocky four years, for if a salesman on the skids hits the bottle, then a psychic dwarf hits the brink; and Tangina was at the brink of everything, waiting for the boot-heel to fall.

The beginning of the end had come for her the day after she'd talked Diane Freeling through the astral plane, to save Carol Anne from the clutches of the Beast. She'd told the Freelings then: "This house is clean."

But it wasn't.

It was in fact so befouled by that sick spirit that the next night they were all nearly destroyed; and the house itself *was* destroyed.

And so was Tangina's self-confidence.

How could she have been so wrong? she wondered. Had the Beast deceived her so completely? Had her senses been so distorted?

Or was she somehow, subconsciously, in *collusion* with the Evil One?

It was this last question, a doubt of her own soul, that was her undoing.

She began to lose her ability to have visions, yet at the same time she was visited by *pavor nocturnis:* night terrors. She would awaken screaming, but with a blackness of memory, a veil she could not penetrate. She became afraid to sleep; consequently, she avoided sleep.

To regain her visions, she returned to the place from which she felt her nightmares must be emanating—Cuesta Verde Estates. More specifically, the Freeling property.

It was a house no longer, of course. A splintered floor, a foundation, a few feet of crawl space—that was all. The city had come, during the intervening weeks, to fill in the half-dug swimming pool that had been the site of so many cadaverous eruptions from the cemetery over which the house was centered.

But the crawl space was all Tangina needed: the remnants of the floor provided an adequate roof for her; she carved out a few nesting placed in the earth beneath it, lined her grottos with tarp, rug, and blanket, and moved in.

She became a creature of the night. She was, as noted, afraid to sleep during the time of shadows, in any case; but in addition, she felt it was the best time to explore the haunted site, to chase down the spirits that stalked her slumber. So at night she dug and she wandered.

She dug directly between the Freeling foundation posts, enlarging the crawl space she was inhabiting, burrowing tunnels straight down or sloping away beneath the concrete. She dug initially with a small hand shovel, wherever her instincts led her, creating an ever more intricate series of shafts, caves, and connecting tunnels. As if she were mining for ghosts.

And she shored up her subterranean excavations with scrap wood, pipes, paint cans . . .

That's how her wandering started.

She needed materials to reinforce her tunnels, so she began raiding the garages and backyards of Cuesta Verde Estates by night. She garnered many useful items this way: children's swing sets furnished good structural supports, as did short lengths of outdoor water pipes; table-tops made good underground archways; workbenches provided useful tools, including hammers for chipping away at bedrock and pipe wrenches for liberating the plumbing that shored up the earth so well.

Of course, neighbors were less than pleased to wake up any given morning to find a favorite trellis dismantled, its struts missing; or a major water leak in the back shed, where a four-foot length of three-inch pipe had simply disappeared.

They connected the disturbances, of course, with the poltergeist that was said to have been the curse of the Freeling household; and some, quick to take warning, put their houses up for sale. Others, more worldly, believing less supernatural forces to be the likely culprits, merely increased security measures: they build fences, bought dogs, installed burglar alarms, hired private patrols.

None of these steps took adequate account of the determination and cunning of a desperate, sleep-deprived, psychic, achondropiastic dwarf.

The vandalism (so-called) and pilfering increased. Furthermore, people were beginning to see things—shadowy forms scampering across the lawn at night—and reports of elves, trolls, hants, and goblins flooded the local police department. Arrests were made, but nothing ever stood up in court; and, in any case, the "disturbances" continued.

More houses went up for sale.

Tangina, on her part, was becoming more gaunt and more driven. By day, she fitfully half slept in her kingdom of catacombs; by night, she tunneled and gathered. Her tunnels led her under adjoining houses, across streets, into natural caverns, into tombs and graves. And the conversations she had with these withered corpses—both in the moment and in her sparse, fragmented dreams—led her further still into obsession, toward madness.

She would go for days without food, then break into someone's kitchen and gobble up whatever was in the refrigerator—cold hot dogs, ginger, ale, milk, Velveeta cheese, beer, carrots—and skulk off again into the starlight to steal furnishings for her dreamland-beneath-the-surface. It went on for months like this before she discovered the first petroglyph.

It was etched on the rock face at the entrance to a natural cavern. It was Indian in origin, and she didn't know what it meant, exactly, except that its psychic impact was so great that it hurled her across the floor and against another wall. She was unconscious for many hours.

When she awoke she knew only that this was the beginning of the portal she'd sought for so long—the entrance to the place that haunted her dreams and distorted her visions. Trembling, she approached the cave drawing and stared at it: it was the likeness of a man with a serpent crawling from his mouth.

She shuddered, retreated up to her original crawl space, and wondered what to do. Fear almost paralyzed her, self-doubt was a willing accomplice. She remained in that earthen cove without food or water for three days.

On the fourth night, hunger and thirst tore her from her warren. She broke in the back door of her downfall: the home of the insomniac local secretary of the American Rifle Association, who had midnight cravings of his own. Hearing rattles in the refrigerator, he tiptoed barefoot into the kitchen, brandishing his favorite twelve-gauge six-shell pump gun. Even so, he wasn't prepared for the vision that confronted him—that of an emaciated three-foot scavenger with a demented look in her eye and ravioli dribbling from her mouth—and his shot went wide.

Tangina was out the door in a flash, but the gunshot aroused the attention of a passing patrol car, and the officers gave chase. Tangina, debilitated and slightly disoriented from malnutrition and dehydration, ran not to her hideaway but to a skateboard park with only one entrance. She was caught.

She admitted nothing; she *said* nothing. For two weeks the public

housed and fed her in the jail ward of the county hospital. And it must be said that during that period the citizens of Cuesta Verde Estates *continued* to experience and report strange happenings in their homes —chandeliers crashing to the floor, air conditioner panels flying across the room, lamps going on and off—so one might surmise that Tangina's tunnelings beneath these various houses had liberated or awakened a host of spirits from whatever slumber they'd enjoyed before her arrival. In any case, she wasn't responsible for *all* the mischief the authorities had attributed to her, making her arrest a somewhat less successful police action than had initially been hoped.

In fact, they probably couldn't even have prosecuted her for the one felony she'd been caught in the *act* of committing, since the secretary of the American Rifle Association was too ashamed to testify in court that he'd been unable to hit a malnourished midget in his own kitchen with a shotgun.

Still, she was obviously crazy, and the county was ready to commit her to long-term hospitalization when—because she was still technically in jail—they granted her the single phone call to which she was entitled.

She called Dr. Martha Lesh.

Lesh sprung her that afternoon—bail wasn't all that steep on a breaking and entering to steal nonfat milk and tuna fish salad; nor did it hurt that this person into whose custody Tangina was being released was a psychiatrist—this type of guardianship got the court (in the court's opinion, of course) off the hook.

Lesh, in any event, was the university professor and psychic researcher who'd become involved with the Freelings during that whole horrible episode—become involved with them by monitoring all the phenomena that were occurring in the house with infrared cameras, voltmeters, and the like. Lesh taped while Tangina astral-projected.

Now, half a year later, Lesh was back to her classes, and Tangina was one of the bag ladies of the fifth dimension.

"How can I help you?" Lesh asked as they walked out of the jail ward.

"Come on back to Cuesta Verde with me," said Tangina.

And so they went. Tangina showed Lesh through the underground city of graves and caves and Indian drawings, and it wasn't long before Lesh got pretty excited about the idea of a university-funded exploration of the site—possibly cofunded by the departments of anthropology, history . . . Lesh's wheels were already turning.

She got the appropriate release forms from the Freelings; she got the

required city permits; she got the lot designated by the state as a potential historic landmark of early California settlement; she got co-funding for digs to begin; she got a fence put up around the whole lot so little kids wouldn't fall in a hole and sue and so poachers wouldn't steal any artifacts the research team might unearth.

This all took another half year, during which the rest of the houses in the area went up for sale or were simply abandoned by their owners. No one wanted to buy there; no one wanted to live there. Too many strange things had happened—and were still happening. Too many ghosts in too many closets.

Tangina was named assistant director on the project, over the objections of some of the senior faculty—she was quite an oddity for a community of academics. For any community at all, in fact.

For one thing, she went right back to living down in her catacombs as soon as she was physically up to par. Lesh was dubious about this at first, but Tangina insisted, and Lesh wasn't all that hard to convince—after all, her major interest was in observing and documenting Tangina's psychic experiences in situ, and Tangina assured her that extrasensory phenomena were standing in line waiting to show themselves here.

And so they did.

But not to Lesh.

In fact, as far as Lesh was concerned, Tangina simply disappeared for a couple months. What she wasn't aware of was that Tangina had only migrated to another plane of existence.

She tunneled beyond the first cave drawing and—barely two feet further on—plunged eight feet straight down a sandhole into a large cavern. She had no light, but she knew it was large by its echo. A small landslide closed over the hole she'd fallen through. There were several tunnels leading from the cave, all black as blindness. She took one by feel and knew it was the right one instantly: a cold, ethereal wind rushed around the walls, filling her like a whirlpool. She lay down quickly, to avoid injury. And in the next moment her spirit was sucked into the maelstrom.

Black light sparkled in every direction, every photon hitting her with a tiny explosion, turning her this way and that. She made no effort to control her flow in these currents for some time. Eventually her spirit was pulled down a chute of brighter blackness to a place of colored waters, mostly blues and violets. These waters buffeted her to a geyser of shimmering orange, which shoot her to another plane, a dimension she was not unfamiliar with. The place of mists.

Wandering souls there. The Lost Ones who could not find the Light, though it flooded their eyes.

The Beast had dwelled here before, but she didn't see him now—not in his previous incarnation, at least. What she did see was much worse, in a way, because it was so much more human. What she saw was Henry Kane.

He saw her, too—saw her at once as food for his diseased soul—and moved quickly to devour her.

She flew away heedless of where. She knew only that she was no match for this abomination in her uncertain condition, and she had to get away. So she closed her eyes and flung her spirit into the ether, spinning out to the deepest hidden pocket of nowhere; and there she huddled, silent and chilly and beyond Kane's reach.

It was a place of whites and grays and blacks. The land was covered with a coalish spongy nettle that she crouched under—it was good for hiding, though it pierced and scratched her. Other souls cowered here as well, some totally out of sight, some calling out to attract the attention of the flying creatures that soared above.

These, too, were black, with human torsos and heads, but some had only eyes, without noses or mouths, and some had only mouths, without noses or eyes. They flew on torn, batlike wings and had sticky spider legs, and they swooped low over the sponge nettles, picking up random souls in their talons and veering up into the clouds.

The clouds were black, like splashes of ink. Periodically one would be punctured and deflate, spilling a viscous, tarlike substance all over the sky.

Needle-toothed hyenas prowled upright on two legs, through the brush, howling regularly in triumph or anguish. Sometimes they bit someone and laughed.

Large, dangerous birds stalked here, too, pecking, pecking.

A face appeared in the sky from time to time: two-dimensional, hollow, commanding. It would be torn apart by gray winds or set upon burrs that spun off the nettles.

Pits of black lava emerged and disappeared. Lakes of tar bubbled up creatures who congealed and flew away.

The air was full of pain.

Here Tangina resided for many weeks, afraid to move.

Here Taylor found her in his wanderings.

"This is not a place for such a one as you," his spirit told her. He stood brazenly above the low brush, undaunted by the flying things, the pecking things, the biting things.

“What do you know of such a one as me?” she asked suspiciously. Might he not have been an agent of the Beast?

“I have tracked you from the tomb of my ancestors,” he said. “When you unearthed those sleeping spirits, their call awoke me, and I came to judge your intentions—but your spirit was already screaming from the Evil One, so I have trailed your sign from the Canyon of Shadows to this place of fear.”

A flying thing without eyes dived at him, but he batted it aside backhanded, and with a wail it melted into a smoky rain that blistered the souls beneath it.

“Have I . . . given offense by entering the tombs marked by Indian sign?” she asked. She still couldn’t glean what was in store for her; she was still thick with dread.

“No.” Taylor smiled. “Rather you allowed their spirits to escape from a place they loathed. Their spirits are free now. I am here to help you.”

“I could use a little assistance at that.” She nodded. A hyena screeched at Taylor and ran off. She held his hand, and it was warm, and she was less afraid. “There was great evil in those caves,” she said. “I could feel it, even blind as I’ve become.”

“To reach the darkest evil, you must dig deeper still—to the true core. It is there you will find the Evil One in his lair and perhaps learn the story that my ancestors told on the walls and set themselves to guard with their spirits.”

“What is that story?”

“The story of the white man Kane . . . but it is a story each must learn alone. It is not for me to tell. Only let me guide you back now, that you may continue to unearth his unholy tomb.”

So he led her out of this hell, back to the place of mists, to the portal that returned to the Fifth World—the earthly plane.

“Good-bye for now,” he said. “I must find Sings-With-Eagles.” And he was gone.

She was about to return to her body when Kane roared up from inside a darkish vapor. It terrified her just to view him. She dived through the portal, but not before he’d sent two of his followers down on her—shrieking, dancing ghouls wearing eyeless masks. They struck out at her, clawing her eyes, blinding her totally to further visions of these nether dimensions.

The first bulldozer on the first day of digging opened up the cave in which Tangina’s almost lifeless body was slumped against a far wall.

Hypothermic, hypo metabolic, she looked like a corpse. But Lesh was called right over, and she found a pulse.

They rushed Tangina to the hospital, where she remained in coma for two more days. Then suddenly she sat up in bed, holding her hands to her eyes and screaming, “I’m blind! I’m blind!”

She remained in the hospital another week, during which her health and her earthly vision returned to normal, though her spirits did not.

She could no longer see in the astral. Not even in her nightmares.

This was a blow to Lesh, too, since she’d been counting on recording Tangina’s visions. It was such a blow that she tried to rectify the situation in a rather unorthodox, even unprofessional, manner. She took Tangina to the excavation one night, hypnotized her, and then put herself in a trance using autosuggestion.

The idea was go get Tangina into a dissociative state that approximated her psychic states and then break through whatever boundary was frightening her by reaching a similar level of consciousness and attaining some kind of empathetic resonance.

Whatever Lesh had in mind exactly, it didn’t work—in a big way.

Tangina became terrified in her blindness at the entrance to the next plane; Lesh tried to ease her spirit there, showing her there was a way in and a way out; Tangina, in her panic, thrashed wildly, knocking Lesh *through* the portal to the other side; and Lesh never returned. Couldn’t find her way out.

When Tangina came back into her body at the cave site, Lesh was dead.

The diagnosis was coronary infarction, but Tangina knew the real cause of death: caught on the wrong side without an escort; a victim not even of her own fear but of Tangina’s.

It caused something of a scandal. The project shut down, pending a lengthy investigation. The last holdout homeowners of Cuesta Verde left town. And Tangina went underground—figuratively, this time. She moved to Hollywood.

It was a transient’s apartment building just off the Boulevard, known to the locals as the Sundown Hotel—because that was the time of day it seemed to come alive. And there Tangina wandered the halls, searching for her lost soul.

She felt as if she’d betrayed Dr. Lesh, a woman of great heart. So she kept herself from making friends, lest she betray them as well, simply by the force of her own weakness. There was one woman, however, with whom she began to spend time—an old Mexican woman who lived alone, two doors down. Together they’d sit for

hours, sipping absinthe and casting tarot.

It was this woman who told Tangina she must prepare for a final battle if she ever hoped to control her own destiny again.

It was this woman who told her she had to confront her worst fears if she was ever to know herself again.

It was this woman who told her she would soon meet a tall, dark man in some out-of-the-way place.

And it was the following weekend, rummaging around the temporarily abandoned Camp Cuesta Verde Excavation Site 1, that Tangina ran into Taylor. For the first time, in the flesh.

They nodded knowing, without greeting. He pointed her in the direction digging should proceed, if it were ever renewed. She told him what had happened to the house that had been here, and to the family that had lived in it. He gave her an old photograph—a group picture of settlers on their way west, led by a man in a black hat. She stared at this man and became quite breathless. She knew his face. It was the face of the creature that had almost devoured her on her last visit to the astral. Taylor said his name was Kane.

Tangina held the picture, trembling, and promised Taylor they would dig to the core.

She saw Taylor a few more times after that. He visited her at the Sundown Hotel, made some magic for her, helped her regain a little of her equilibrium.

Digging started up again, with new directors and assistant directors; but Tangina was able to finagle a position as an unpaid consultant. And because she was more obsessive about the excavation than anyone else, she ended up making a number of directorial decisions.

They found the core.

Taylor confirmed it.

But the Beast had apparently penetrated City Hall, and suddenly, the next morning, the order came down: the excavation had to cease; the site was to be filled in forthwith, by city edict. Health violations were cited—never mind the fact that no one lived there anymore.

Soon after that, Tangina got the call from Diane, asking about Taylor's trustworthiness. It would have been funny had it not been so sad, for *Tangina* was the one who could not trust herself. She should have gone to Steve and Diane: the core was exposed; the spirits were out; Carol Anne was in danger of falling to the rantings of the Beast once more—Taylor had explained all this—but Tangina had not been able to bring herself to go the Freelings' aid again. She was too lost in her own fear.

So Taylor had gone.

But this fact sat on Tangina's chest like a weight, keeping her once more from sleeping, from eating, from looking at herself in the mirror, until finally she knew she had to go herself, if—as the old Mexican woman had warned—she ever wanted to take control of her own life.

So she went. She took a bus to Phoenix, went to the Freeling house, knocked. No answer. Knocked and knocked and knocked, until at last a terrified Diane answered the door.

"Tangina!" she exclaimed.

"Sorry to come unannounced, sweetie," said Tangina, "but I need to speak with you."

"I'm so glad you're here," whispered Diane.

"I'm glad you're glad," said Tangina, pressed by her own flagging spirit, by the demon's hand in City Hall, by the proximity of the Beast to Carol Anne. "Because we're running out of time."

CHAPTER 6

"Are you feeling strong?" asked the dwarf.

Diane nodded.

"Good. Come on. I've got somethin' to show you."

They sat on the living room sofa, and without further preliminary—as if they'd last seen each other the day before—they began going over a packet of photos Tangina had brought.

"This is . . . the lot our house used to be on," said Diane, looking at the first picture. It was barren, an empty space full of dust devils.

"Yes, it is," said Tangina. She showed Diane the next shot.

"And this is . . . excavation around where the house used to be?"

"Yes, below the old cemetery," said Tangina. "It leads to what seems to be a tomb, with many bodies, directly *below your* house." She turned to the next picture—the bodies. Skeletons, mummies, piled one on the other inside some great cavern. Anguish emanated from the photograph.

"Who are they?" Diane spoke softly.

"The researchers investigating the site have only the vaguest guesses about who these people were. There are no marked graves." She paused to let Diane absorb the photo, to let her spirit register the scene. Then she continued. "There *are,* however, records of a religious sect that mysteriously disappeared . . ."

"What happened?" said Diane. Her breathing quickened; her palms got sweaty.

"Their spiritual leader was a medium who led his followers out to California in the early eighteen hundreds to start a utopian society. They disappeared near Cuesta Verde in the eighteen-forties and were believed massacred by Indians."

Diane shook her head vehemently, upset, distracted. "No—not massacred," she whispered.

Tangina smiled without pleasure.

Taylor drove up past Flagstaff, into Navajo territory again. The sun was high, bleaching everything shadowless, making the sandy buttes and mesas look almost two-dimensional.

"Beautiful scenery, huh?" Steve said admiringly. He'd been anxious at first, driving to who-knows-where with this who-knows-what kind of Indian. Anxious about leaving Diane alone, too. But something about this landscape calmed him, brought him peace. Something about the simplicity of the rock, the earth tones, the spareness of it all.

"This is the crucible," said Taylor, reading Steve's face. "The crucible of the soul of the world."

Steve nodded. "Where we going?"

"To my prayer-lodge," said Taylor. "Over beyond that rimrock. My kiva, where I take power and seek Ways. It is a sacred place."

"Like a church?" asked Steve.

Taylor smiled. "The Church of Taylor."

They drove in silence again, each bound up in his own thoughts. Steve wondered if Taylor ever used peyote during his religious rites; Taylor wondered if Steve ever looked inside himself. Steve wondered if he should have called the police about Kane; Taylor wondered if he had enough magic to help this man beside him, who believed in nothing. Steve wished he had a beer; Taylor wished he had an eagle claw. And so on.

The truck bumped for a while over a scrubby plain, curving around a small mesa, until eventually Taylor brought it to a halt in the middle of no possible where and got out. "Let's walk," he said.

They walked.

Even high desert is desert, and at high noon in August it is emphatically so. They walked; they sweated; they rapidly parched. Steve periodically stumbled over rocks or gopher holes, but he made it a point not to fall behind the silent Indian. Once he started to take off his shirt, but Taylor advised him not to, so as not to lose as much body fluid.

That's when Steve realized they had no water. "Hey, how far *is* this place?" he said.

Taylor only shrugged, though, and pointed vaguely in the direction they were walking.

They walked for a long time—long enough for Steve to consider many things about his life: his marriage—long and loving, up and down, now stuck on the shoals of his own loss of self-esteem; his children—a teenage daughter who'd left forever to escape what she called "a totally psycho family," a loner son who had no friends and looked as if he'd just decided to stop growing at the age of nine, and a fey daughter who had nightmares she couldn't remember and seemed to be in a world of her own half the time; his wife—the rock of the

family, the inner strength . . .

And himself. Where was *his* strength? What had *happened* to his life? Things had been cruising along just fine, everything on schedule, and then *whammo,* the cosmic banana peel. Why me? he wondered.

That's when Taylor put a hand on his sleeve to stop him. That's when he saw the rattlesnake poised near his left foot.

"Oh, shit," said Steve.

The rattler rattled.

"Don't move," said Taylor. "Give me the eagle feather."

"What?" whispered Steve. His throat was dry; he could hardly get the word out.

"The eagle feather I gave you on the porch," Taylor said softly but insistently. "Give it to me now."

Steve remembered and pulled it from his hip pocket. Taylor took it, and with a slow, rhythmic, wandlike motion, he began to pass it back and forth across the snake's field of vision.

Uncertainly at first, and then as if enchanted, the snake's head started to bob from side to side, following the motion of the feather. Taylor began to chant, bringing the feather still closer. The rattlesnake dropped its head, weaving, under Taylor's spell. It lolled against a rock. Taylor stooped slowly, picked it up by the neck.

"Forgive me, brother," he said, and whacked off its head with one swift blow of a large knife he drew from somewhere.

The snake's body dropped to the ground, writhing in the dust. Its head Taylor held close to his own face—its jaws wide open, its fangs dripping—as he inhaled deeply. "With thanks I take from you the Sacred Wind of Life," he said solemnly.

Steve just stared in awe. "How . . . how . . ."

Taylor smiled. "The eagle is the one creature feared by the rattlesnake. I only made this snake think I was an eagle, circling for food, and he followed my wing and then lay still when I would not go away. So mark this well: if you can make your enemy believe you are an eagle, then you are an eagle."

He tossed the head far into the desert, then quickly filleted the now sluggish body and draped it over his shoulders. "Will make a fine dinner tonight," he commented.

The rattle he cut off and gave to Steve. "Here is the second totem for your medicine bag." He returned the eagle feather as well.

Steve took both items, still a bit dazed from the heat and the near danger and the wonder.

Two totems, he thought, and two lessons: Evil can enter your heart only if you invite it; and you are what you think you are, and what others think you are.

He couldn't dwell on these, though—Taylor was already walking again, and Steve had to run to catch up. After another half hour of walking, he was in for another jolt. They were back at the pickup truck, where their journey into the desert had begun.

"There's another lesson in this, right?" said Steve.

Taylor only smiled, though, and walked twenty yards over the next rise. Coming up just behind him, Steve saw what seemed to be a round, wooden hut. They approached it together. It consisted of stacks of smooth logs, tightly packed, sealed with clay mortar, in the shape of a dome, with a large square hole at its cap. Taylor scrambled to the top, then helped Steve up.

Taylor pointed east. "Beyond that rock is the place called Where We Emerged—the place where my people emerged from the Fourth World into this, the Fifth World."

He climbed through the hole at the top of the dome, then fifteen feet down a wood and thong ladder to a hard dirt floor, where he dropped the dead snake by his side. Steve followed.

It was a great round room, mostly underground, with the same log and mortar wall that extended above ground to create the dome at the top. It was cool, even with the hot sun pouring in the open skylight.

"Nice place," said Steve. He wasn't sure what you were supposed to say to an Indian about his personal church.

"I was taught, in its construction, by the Ant People," Taylor replied, as if by explanation.

"The Ant People." Steve nodded.

Taylor motioned him to sit on a mound of earth against one wall covered by a Navajo blanket; then he went over to an adobe fire pit at the center of the room, stoked it with branches, and set to starting a small fire.

Steve looked around. There was a deer skull beside him, still sprouting antlers. And placed carefully across the floor were various familiar and unfamiliar objects: some mountain lion claws, assorted crystals, dried herbs, carved figurines, a kachina mask, a long ceremonial pipe, a few stone beads.

Taylor got the fire started, sat on the ground opposite Steve, and began to chant. The room filled slowly with smoke as he did so, and then with heat. Both men took their shirts off.

Steve wondered what the guys would say if they could see him now

—half-naked, half praying to a war god to help him chase the ghosts out of his house. He half stifled a laugh.

Taylor stopped chanting. “This funny?” he said.

“Well . . .” Steve didn’t want to offend the man, but the two of them sweating around a pile of steaming rocks was too reminiscent to suppress. “Maybe we could install a sauna like this in our garage, and open a health . . .” Taylor was not laughing. Steve sighed. “No . . . no . . . not funny.”

Taylor did smile, though, in sympathy for this lost man—for are we not all lost? “Sense of humor is good,” he said. “You’ll need it.”

Then he clapped his hands, sprinkled something over the fire that made it smoke, and began singing in Hopi once more.

The smoke twisted strangely into the air, swaying with a seeming will of its own, as if there were life to it, a spirit life that moved to the rhythms of Taylor’s atonal droning, until it began to congeal, to shape itself . . .

And suddenly it was the image of the Beast.

A human face, yet inhuman, full of torment and hatred.

Steve was paralyzed by this vision. His own mocking laughter echoed hollowly in his brain. He remembered this face from four years ago, when it had lunged out of the closet at him.

It lunged now. Swooped down at him with a howling screech . . . and then dissipated.

Taylor brought the ceremonial pipe over. “The entity reveals himself to you, his enemy,” he said somberly. “Now you have seen each other and there will be no mistakes.”

“Mistakes? Mistakes about what?” Steve trembled, shaken.

“Take the pipe. Now.”

Steve did as he was told, putting one end of the long pipe into his mouth as Taylor held the other end and blew. Smoke poured into Steve’s mouth—he gagged, swallowed, and inhaled.

Taylor continued. “First we must ask forgiveness of this thing, before we kill it.” He looked to heaven. “Smoke, make him one with power and knowledge.”

Steve turned pale with the fear of power and knowledge.

Tangina was showing Diane more pictures. “Here is a photo of those people—a group portrait, taken just at the start of their journey.”

Diane looked away. She’d found her visions terribly disturbing; she wanted no more of it.

"Please look at it," Tangina went on. "Tell me what you feel. I know this is hard for you, dear—it's hard for me, too. Harder than you can imagine. These pictures fill my dreams. I've hardly slept in more than . . ." She stopped. She hadn't come here to commiserate. "I need your verification," she went on more slowly, "on something I feel. You see, I don't fully trust my instincts anymore."

There was something so pitiable about this last statement that Diane had to look at her. She did look drawn, and a bit lost. The unhappy medium.

Tangina placed the photo in Diane's hand. "Hold this, child. Tell me what you feel."

Diane stared at the old tintype before her, but in half a second she was reeling at what she saw there. "My God," she whispered. "It's him. I've seen him."

She pointed to the man standing in the back row of the 150-year-old photograph. A sallow man in a black hat, chill even at this distance.

Henry Kane.

"Where have you seen him?" Tangina pushed gently.

"Here. At the mall. At our *door."* She stopped her hand from shaking. She had to be strong. "Who is he?"

"Please, Diane—tell me what you feel. Just tell me what you feel." She needed the pure feelings of this strong woman to lean on.

Diane felt only at a loss, though. "What do you want me to do?"

Tangina was intentionally vague. She didn't want to influence, with her own distorted perceptions, what Diane might otherwise see clearly. "I've consulted others," she hinted. "They told me things, but they said you would know more."

"I don't know anything!" Diane shouted, beginning to panic.

"Yes, you do, Diane. You traveled into that astral dimension that few people have ever traveled to incarnate. Your daughter is highly clairvoyant, as was your mother." She paused to let the impact of all this settle in for a moment—Carol Anne's special abilities, their battle in the astral plane years before. "As *you* are clairvoyant as well, I suspect, though you try to repress it or deny it. But we can't afford to repress it anymore, Diane, painful as it is. And I know far more of its pain than you do. Now, for God's sake, Diane—for the sake of all of our souls—tell me what you feel!"

Gingerly, Diane placed her hand on the photo and closed her eyes.

The vision came:

The dark cavern, full of corpses, only now the skeletal remains grew

flesh, regained vital organs, glistening, and then skin covered the flesh; and they began to move. They looked up, up into a flickering light, writhed in agony toward the light, coughing, gasping, clawing for air, and the faces were clear: they were the people in the photograph, the group portrait. Only now there was no hope in their expressions, only anguish, desperation, as the light on their faces was slowly eclipsed.

"It's him," choked Diane, barely able to breathe, "the preacher. These people follow him in death as they did in life."

"Yes," said Tangina, "yes, go on."

"Many people . . . it's dark . . . terrible . . . frightening—"

Diane's eyes shot open, the trance broken. She couldn't witness any more.

Tangina touched Diane's arm. "Rest easy, child. That was a good start. See, when you brought Carol Anne back to this world, his followers became restless, for they had tasted the light of her being—her life force."

Diane suddenly realized, and it was like the bottom falling out. "Now he wants her back," she whispered.

"This person is no longer human," Tangina said, expressing more dismay than she'd intended. "He is the Beast."

Steve became one with the smoke. He rose through the top hatch of the kiva, rose above the arid mesa, filtered between puffy white clouds, rose to black space, where the sun was just another star. He swirled through clouds of interstellar gas, became ignited by comet tails, froze to crystalline lace work against the heavy metal of wandering meteors.

He dissolved into deep space beyond the stars at the edge of the universe, on to a place where values like good and evil have no meaning; and here he saw, once more, the smoke of the Beast that hunted him.

Their smokes turned around each other in helical embrace, mingled, then repelled, then floated there, sensing each other, unmoving, waiting.

And their power was equal. Steve could feel it, and so could the Other.

Steve's essence did not want; his spirit could match anything the Beast devised

He was strong, and infinitely in tune with the fabric of the universe.

And if he could, at some deep level, remember this moment of

parity—of power—he could win any contest.

He swirled like a dancer, becoming the melody that wove through him, the melody of the Hopi chant . . .

And suddenly he was back in the kiva, sweating, facing Taylor.

He smiled shakily. “What was *in* that pipe?”

Taylor looked grim. “Now that you have the power of the smoke, you must take your family back to Cuesta Verde.”

“What!?” This jolted Steve back to reality fast. He never wanted to hear the name Cuesta Verde, let alone go back there. Back to the place that marked the crumbling of his life.

But he was strong. That feeling was still with him, if he could only hold on to it.

Taylor continued. “The spirit that haunts you is stalking you. You are out here lost in the wilderness like a rabbit. The Evil One knows where you are, how to find you, and what your weaknesses are. Your best chance is to surprise him and confront him off guard in his own lair. Like a lion.”

“I don’t know, Taylor. Diane and the kids—”

“They are your strength. And you are theirs. Do not use them as your excuse, for together your power is many times what it is alone. Together, you can defeat this Thing.”

“You are alone,” argued Steve.

“I am Navajo,” he said simply. Then he picked up the headless snake and draped it around his shoulders once more.

They climbed up the ladder, back out to the purity of the crucible, and walked to the truck.

Taylor said, “The actions you take will be based not on logic but on intuition.”

“What does that mean?”

“What it means is of no importance. You must ask, What does it *feel*?”

What it felt like to Steve at the moment was out of control. “Are things desperate, Taylor?”

“What you see as desperate, I see as inevitable.” If he meant this as a reassurance, it didn’t work. He shrugged, in any case, and said, “I’ve done all I can. I must leave you now.” He began walking into the desert.

“Hey, wait a minute—where are you going?”

“You take the truck back to Phoenix, to your family. They need you

now. You are strong, you can help them now. For me, I have my own journey."

Whereupon he walked over a steep rise and out of sight.

Steve had had all the lessons he was going to have for today. Now it was time for homework.

Tangina walked to the front door, accompanied by Diane. The sun was low, and Steve wasn't back yet, and Diane wished Tangina weren't leaving. She told her so.

Tangina smiled sadly. "I want you to know somethin'. I'm afraid." Her voice got so quiet. "That's the real reason I haven't come sooner, and why I'm leavin' now."

"I . . . understand," Diane tried.

"No, you don't. But believe me when I tell you my fear would only ensnare you when you needed to be most bold. My fear is dead weight. It's no good for me, and it would be disastrous to bring around you."

"But you were so fearless," Diane protested. "You guided us through hell."

"You guided yourself. I was just takin' tickets at the gate. And I've been undone by doubts ever since. That first time I told you your house was clean, and it wasn't—that was the beginnin' of the end for me. My dreams are distorted since then, I don't read signs right; I don't believe in myself anymore—and the Beast knows it. No, I'd be worse than useless to you now, because you trust me, and the Beast could use that to destroy you." She opened the door.

"I still wish you wouldn't go."

"There's somethin' else you should know. The authorities are going to seal off the cavern—the one in Cuesta Verde under where the house used to be. The day after tomorrow. Health regulations," she added with a sardonic smile.

Diane stooped down and hugged her. "Maybe that'll end it all."

Tangina didn't push it. "Maybe," she said.

"I'll miss you." Diane spoke as if she might never see the woman again.

"God bless, child." Tangina returned the feeling, closing the door behind her.

Steve didn't get home until eight. Taylor's pickup broke down just outside Flagstaff, so after calling home to assure Diane he was fine but

late, he hitched a ride to the bus station.

So he was road-weary when he walked in the front door, but still pumped up from his day with Taylor—the baking sun, the closeness to the land, the power of the smoke, the power in *himself.* These things were with him, and he wanted to share them with his family.

His family sat glumly around the kitchen table, picking over three-day-old meat loaf.

Carol Anne and Robbie gazed out the back window to the area of the back yard where Taylor's tent no longer stood. Diane welcomed him with a perfunctory kiss on the cheek, then settled back down to messing the meat around in the ketchup.

It had a significant dampening effect on Steve's spirits, but he nonetheless tried to be the cheerleader. "Hey, come on, everything's gonna be fine. Just because Taylor's gone doesn't mean anything bad is going to happen."

"Right!" said Diane, trying to pitch in.

"We're great," he asserted. "We're a great family."

Robbie and Carol Anne looked unconvinced, giving the distinct impression they'd much rather have been part of Taylor's family at the moment.

"What do you say," Steve ran on, "tomorrow we play some miniature golf?"

No reaction.

"Well, then, how about bowling?"

No reaction.

"Okay, anybody up for a nature hike?"

No reaction.

Diane almost smiled, but she was too tired to work the right muscles. "Tangina was here today," she said.

Steve squinted. "Yeah? She come to help out again?" Although she'd been instrumental in saving Carol Anne, Steve had never fully trusted her—he viewed her, rather, as a sorcerer's apprentice who could unloose spells but not quite control them.

"Don't take that tone, Steven. She didn't have to come at all."

He was starting to get annoyed. "Well, that would've been just fine. We can do just fine on our own, just fine."

"Just like we've been doing just fine for the past four years," Diane said irritably.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. Just nothing." She stood up. "Let's go, kids, time for bed."

She took them upstairs quietly—they always got quiet when their parents got like this.

Steve went into the den, really steamed now. He'd been breaking his back for four years to get this family on track again—things were starting to come together, too—and then this sideshow palm reader shows up and Diane's ready to follow her anywhere.

Women. They had no sense of the stresses a man was under to perform, to save, to win.

He flopped into the easy chair, grabbed the half-empty bottle of tequila from the table, and took a thirsty pull.

He was getting no support from Diane; that was the problem. The kids were in love with Taylor—sure, what kid wouldn't be in love with a big, mysterious Indian?—and Diane was in awe of a psychic dwarf. Supposedly psychic. Steve had his doubts.

He took another long drink.

He stared into space, swirling the bottle. Swirling, the worm at the bottom of the bottle almost seemed to move, as if it were swimming through the currents of the liquor.

So here was Steve, alone again—as usual. Taylor gone, Tangina gone. Abandoned by everyone when the going got rough. When the going gets rough, the rough get loaded, he thought slyly. He had another drink. He looked around the room.

Toys cluttered the floor. Stuffed animals, software, robots, cars, dolls, puzzles . . . and the toy phone.

He studied the phone. He thought about it. Don't use logic, Taylor had said. Use intuition. He looked around to make certain he wasn't being watched. "Why not?" he muttered to himself.

He picked up the receiver and listened.

Nothing.

There had to be a way to work this thing out. Anybody could be convinced to listen to reason with the right argument.

Phone in hand, he walked out the back door and into the garage. And there, in the cluttered darkness, he spoke softly into the mouthpiece.

"Hello? Hello? Listen, if anybody's there . . . I mean, Jess . . . or anybody . . . please listen to me. This is Steve Freeling. You've been trying to . . . make contact. Is anybody there? Hello?"

No response. Only the silence of the garage, the loneliness of the night.

Steve suddenly felt foolish. A grown man sneaking make-believe conversations on a toy phone. Really dumb.

He tossed the phone in a corner and resumed his post in the den, bottle in hand: now *here* was an inanimate object he knew how to have a conversation with. How do you do? he said silently to the golden liquor, bringing the bottle to his lips and tilting his head back.

A few more exquisite gulps flowed down his throat as the worm at the bottom slid along the upturned glass to the very mouth of the bottle—to Steve's very lips—before he put it down again and the worm slid back to the bottom.

And the worm at the bottom, as if awakened, slowly opened a demonic eye and waited.

CHAPTER 7

Diane and Carol Anne were taking a bubble bath together upstairs, telling stories to each other to avoid the stories that kept playing inside their heads.

"So after Alice fell down the hole," Carol Anne asked at one point, "why'd she drink from that bottle?" Carol Anne knew bottles were bad; her mother had told her so.

"Because it said 'Drink me' on it," Diane explained.

"Oh" said Carol Anne. "Were they going to capture Alice and take her someplace bad?" She knew all about that story.

"Yes, but Alice gets home, remember?" That was the point in Diane telling this one again—to reinforce the conclusion for Carol Anne: Alice get home. Alice gets home.

"Mom, did she know why they wanted to hurt her?"

"No, I guess not, hon." Why does anybody want to hurt anybody?

"Cuz I know," Carol Anne volunteered.

"You know what, honey?"

"Why they're here." Her voice had become very small.

"Why, baby? Why are they here?"

"Cuz they don't know where else to go," said Carol Anne, and began crying.

Diane hugged her, tried to protect her from these visions and memories and dreams and demons, tried to guard her with the love of a mother whose child is in danger. "Baby, baby, don't you worry, okay? Mama's never gonna let them hurt you. Never."

And all the while a mist was forming in the front yard, thickening here and then there into the shapes of human figures—spirit vapors that floated slowly toward the house in the treacherous night.

Steve took another hit on the bottle, asking the eighty-proof spirits to give him courage, to help him be strong.

They were the wrong spirits to ask.

As he tilted the bottle back further, wondering whether or not to finish it off, the worm slid to the lip, paused as Steve began his swallow, and then shot ahead, into his mouth. And down his throat.

Instantly, Steve sat up, dropping the bottle to the floor. His eyes went wide; his heart went cold; his hand went to his neck.

No! was his last coherent thought. What have I done?

He clutched his throat with both hands, trying to wrestle off his own head to get at the demon now inside him. But it was too late. He stood, kicking the bottle across the floor, knocking over the table lamp, stumbling to the kitchen counter, where he slumped and then rose again.

Only now his eyes were a little like moss as he softly began to sing, “He is in His Holy Temple . . .”

Then he smiled and stopped singing, listening instead to the voices he heard upstairs. Carol Anne and her mother.

He walked upstairs and into the bathroom, where Carol Anne had just finished getting into her pajamas. Diane was in the bedroom. He stared at the child with a craving, craven expression she’d never seen before, and it frightened her.

“You okay, Dad?” she asked.

“Sure, honey. I just wanted to give my little girl a hug.” He stooped down and picked her up, with a funny sound at the back of his throat, like a gurgle, that made her want to get down, to get away.

Diane came in, drying her hair. After a moment’s indecision, Steve reluctantly put Carol Anne down. “We’ll play later,” he said to her with a flat grin. “I just want to talk to Mom first, for a second. Alone.”

“Go dry your hair, honey,” Diane added from under the towel.

Carol Anne regarded her father strangely and left the room.

“Steven, what’s going on?” Diane said, walking back into the master bedroom. She sounded upset—she *was* upset, with Carol Anne so fragile, everything so crazy, Steve reeking of alcohol . . .

“I just wanted us to be alone,” said Steve. He came up behind her at the closet door and began to rub her neck. “That feel good?”

“Yes . . .” she said ambivalently. She wasn’t in the mood to feel good, though; she had too much on her mind.

“Good.” Steve continued, working his hands down lower on her back.

“But I want to get back to Carol Anne . . .” Diane tried to pull away gently.

Gently, he held her. “The kids are safe,” he whispered, his voice getting husky. He kissed her on the neck, brought his hands around to the front of her chest.

Diane twisted away. “Come on, not now.”

He got cold in a hurry. "Okay—when? When this . . . this whatever-it-is is out of our lives? What if that takes years? Huh? What should I do? Put the marriage on hold until then?" There was a viciousness to his tone she'd never heard before.

"Steven, please." She winced.

"Hey, listen, I have needs, too, you know," he kept hammering.

"Your needs seem to be fulfilled by the bottle tonight," she countered.

He laughed, a hollow, hurtful laugh. "Oh, Diane. What are you doing now? Accusing me of being a drunk? Is that it?"

"I'm not accusing you of anything," she said frostily.

"No?"

"No." This was the last straw, though. She'd never seen this side of his alcoholism—it usually made him maudlin, or ineffectual, or even pathetic, but not brutal like this.

The last interchange had gotten loud enough to draw Carol Anne's attention. She walked softly down the hall to spy at her parents' bedroom door.

Steve was saying, "You don't think I know what's going on with you, is that it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Diane snapped.

"I know you so well," Steve baited her. "I know what you've been thinking."

"Spare me, Steven." She was just about ready to walk.

"For instance, I know that the other day, the morning after your mother died, you remembered helping her plant flowers in the garden when you were seven . . . you saw it clearly." He smiled almost vindictively at the stunned effect this change of tack had on Diane.

"Steven." She blanched. "How did you know—"

"Because I'm smaaaaaart," he mocked. And suddenly she heard a new change in his voice—a change to a register that was disturbingly familiar, but a little too high . . . or something. It made her look at his eyes. He kept on talking: " 'Mummy Jess, Mummy Jess,' " he mimicked. Then, angry again: "So sweet. That's how I know these things."

Carol Anne, peeking through the crack in the door, was growing more upset. But she wasn't even remotely prepared for what she heard next.

Steven had never sounded so base. "You also wished we'd never given birth to Carol Anne," he hissed. "You wished she'd never been

born."

Diane looked horrified and was utterly speechless. Steve continued. "Our troubles are because of her. You've thought that, haven't you? You didn't want Carol Anne." His head turned slightly, to make sure Carol Anne was listening.

Diane walked around the bed. She just couldn't deal with this kind of abuse.

Steve followed her closely, though, whispering after her. "You've thought about it, you've thought about it," he gloated.

That was all Carol Anne could take; her last refuge was self-destructing. Now she had . . . nothing. She ran back to her room, closing the door.

Steve cackled hoarsely.

Diane burst into tears, trying to run from this maniac she thought she knew. He caught her by the arm, though, and pulled her close. "See? I know you pretty well, don't I?" He breathed heavily on her face. His breath was pungent, fetid. "So what about it?" he said suggestively. His thick hand roughly groped at her breast.

The thought of his hand on her now made her physically sick. She pushed him away. "Don't touch me!" she shrieked.

He moved on her, raised his arm. But then a thought struck him, and he paused: Forget her, was his thought.

It was the child he wanted.

His lip curled. "I'm going to leave you. I'm going to leave you alone, Diane. That's what you want, and that's what you're going to get."

He turned and headed for the door.

And suddenly that's just what she felt—all alone.

And she couldn't do it all alone.

She didn't know what had gotten into Steve, but he was probably just cracking up from the same stresses she was under. He was just coming unglued faster. More than ever, it seemed this was a time they had to draw together, not collapse. They'd made it through horrible times before—they could get through this one. They *had* to.

"Steven!" she shouted. "Damn you!" She ran up and grabbed his arm. "Steven, we've *got* to stick together. If we don't—if we fall apart —it *all* falls apart." He was ignoring her but moving toward the door at a slower rate. She kept talking, pleading. "I'm just human, Steven, just like you. I'm not perfect. And I'm sorry if I've hurt you, but . . ." But what? She didn't know what else to say. He was pulling away from her, and she wanted to tell him it would all be okay, they'd work

it out. “I love you,” she rasped.

He stopped cold, as if he’d been hit by a hammer.

She said it again. “I do, I love you, believe me.”

His face turned pale, his body began to shake.

Her love grew stronger with concern. “Steven? Steven! Oh, God, what’s the matter with you? What is it, honey?”

He was convulsing violently, still standing up. He pushed her away, fear on his face. He gagged once and jolted forward, bent over as if he were going to vomit.

He gagged again; his mouth opened.

And it began to come out.

A thick, translucent, gelatinous, snakelike *thing* started slithering from his mouth.

Diane screamed and backed off.

The thing kept coming, writhing, dripping mucus, grayish-pink, thick as an arm at first, then bursting with knobbly, tumorous lumps the longer it grew; like a deformed embryo, pulsing, the size of a small dog by the time it was extruded completely on the carpet.

Steve collapsed in a heap as the thing wriggled under the bed. The trail of slime it left behind smoked like an acid pit.

Under the bed, it visibly began to grow.

Diane knelt beside Steve, trying to revive him. The puddle of ooze where the thing had first been spit up smelled so foul, it made her gag. She pulled Steve away a couple of feet and shook him. “Steven—Steven—wake up!”

The thing crawled out from under the bed. It was twice as big now, like a huge, mutant fetus: bloated, viscous chest, its ribs exposed and dripping matter; tiny, flipperlike arms; a torso that tapered off to no legs at all, but a slippery, malformed, stubbly tail; and a head that was nearly human, with eyes like Kane’s, a decayed nose-hole, a drooling smile, and rotted brain tissue spilling down its forehead.

A face of primitive evil.

It stared at Diane momentarily, then slithered out the door.

“Steven, wake up! Please!” she screamed, and shook him. Then, louder: “Robbie! Carol Anne! Run! Run away!”

She stood and ran to the doorway and shouted after the thing. “Stop, you bastard! Leave us alone!”

But the door slammed in her face, flinging her back into the room. To the floor, beside Steve.

He opened his eyes groggily. He looked over at Diane, whimpering bitterly beside him.

"Diane," he whispered.

They embraced.

Steven had renounced the Beast, and he and Diane were together.

"The kids," she said.

He stood up shakily and tried to open the door. It wouldn't budge. He tried again, and it snapped open suddenly on an empty hallway. Slowly, cautiously, Steve and Diane stepped out onto the landing.

They looked down the hall. Empty. Over the railing to the ground floor. Silent. Timidly they inched toward the children's room. The thing seemed to have disappeared.

But the reason they didn't see it was that it was hanging from the ceiling. And an instant later it dropped to the floor, directly before them—a monster so hideous, its appearance alone made them shrink back toward the bedroom in primal loathing.

It was fully ten feet tall now, its vile head nearly touching the ceiling. But it no longer had just one head—it had several, all partly emerging from the thing's torso, all with different faces that kept molding and remolding, dripping oily humors, gnashing and slavering, all of them repeating in whispers, "She's mine . . . Join us—"

Steve made an inarticulate groan and threw a chair at it, unmindful any longer of his own safety. The chair sailed right *through* the thing, though, and clattered down the stairs.

The Beast roared and snapped its jaws, spittle foaming. Wormlike appendages began sprouting from its head; its intestines were exposed, dripping. Unable to tolerate even the sight of the thing a moment longer, Diane pulled Steve into the bedroom and slammed the door shut—if only for a second, just to gather her resources away from the thing's obscene cackling.

A second was all she had. The Beast's claw smashed through the door, splitting it in half. It wrapped its glistening talons around Steve's throat, jerking him off his feet and out of the bedroom. Diane tried to pull him back, but the thing's strength was unearthly.

Steve felt himself yanked bodily through the air, held in a vise grip by the neck, hauled up to the gaping mouth of the Beast. He heard, in the distance, Diane screaming "No!" but he couldn't see her, everything was becoming murky, everything except the black clarity of the demon's yawning gullet, its jaws on the verge of taking Steve's head off.

Suffocating, Steve looked into the abyss. Was this the end, then? To

become incorporated into this thing of horror, to help perpetuate the horror on other poor souls? It disgusted him, finally, though, more than it terrified him—and that disgust made him realize Carol Anne *couldn't* yet be a part of this thing, or he would have felt more pity for it. And he felt no pity.

He was about to be pulled into it when he expelled the power smoke he'd taken in from Taylor—expelled it into the creature's core.

It screamed—a sound of betrayal and agony he would never forget, though he would often wish to. Screamed and recoiled . . . and a demonic head suddenly shot out of the thing's esophagus, out of its mouth, and dispersed into the walls.

And everything was quiet again. Diane raced up to Steve, who was slumped on the floor, stunned, hurt, shaken.

She helped him up. "Come on, we've got to get out of here."

They stumbled from room to room upstairs, but the kids were nowhere to be found.

As they started downstairs, Diane stopped Steve for a moment and smiled dearly. "You were quite brave," she said, and kissed him. And then they went down.

The downstairs hall was filled with shadows of furniture and imagination. "Robbie?" Diane called. "Carol Anne?"

No answer. They started into the kitchen and the living room lights went out. They started into the living room and strange sounds began emanating from the ceiling—moaning sounds, slapping sounds, breathing sounds—the sounds of something alive.

Steve and Diane ran from room to room frantically, calling out, opening doors, turning on lights, pulling open drawers, pounding on walls.

The walls pounded back.

Finally, in the den, Diane saw Carol Anne's blanket sticking out from under a closet door. With a gasp she wrenched the door open and was deluged by falling vacuum cleaners and appliances that Steve had piled high in there the day before.

They plowed through the remaining household conveniences, tossing boxes wildly into the middle of the room to get to the back of the closet.

But no Carol Anne.

Steve ran to the kitchen again to look in the cabinets under the sink while Diane opened the door to the hall closet.

Dozens of groping hands reached out at her from the darkness of the

closet, the faces looming behind them depraved, insistent. They grabbed her, tried to pull her in. Like the hands that had pulled her into the earth in her dream, they were rotted, cold, clinging, but she extricated herself with a yelp, and they shrank in dismay. They were, finally, merely pitiable. Diane slammed the door on them, muffling their wails.

She heard another noise in the storage space beneath the stairs. Shaking half with fear and half with fury, she swung it open on the momentum of her adrenaline, and a flying shape leapt at her, was on her—

It was Robbie, clutching for safety.

She hugged him forcefully, wanting not to let go. “You okay, baby? You’re all right, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, Mom, I’m okay. Really, You okay?”

Steve ran in to join them, relief on his face as he saw his son safe, then fear again. “Where’s Carol Anne?”

“Dunno, Dad.”

There was a sudden grinding sound and they all looked up. The plaster in the ceiling was beginning to crack.

They ran into the kitchen. “Carol Anne!” Diane yelled. “Answer me right now!”

“Over there!” shouted Robbie. They looked to where he was pointing. Through the window they could see E. Buzz standing at the garage door, barking.

With a thunderous ripping, as if the whole house was being physically torn in half, the crack in the living room ceiling split into a fissure and ran down the hall, into the kitchen. Plaster rained down on their heads.

They ran for the back door. A huge bulge appeared in the ceiling, as if a giant fist were smashing it from above. Great chunks of plaster and beam collapsed as they made it through the back door, into the yard, into the garage with E. Buzz.

And there was Carol Anne, sitting in the car, holding her Katrina doll, quaking.

Steve tried the door handle, but it was locked. “You okay, honey?” he shouted through the glass. He saw the car keys in the ignition.

Carol Anne just kept staring straight ahead. Diane and Robbie ran around to check the doors on the other side.

Steve spoke softer. “Open the door, honey. It’s okay now.”

But it wasn’t. And at that moment the toys and tools piled against

the walls came alive.

The jack-in-the-box sprang out and began repeatedly striking Steve in the leg. A stuffed monkey started throwing things at the car and the family—screwdrivers, nails, chunks of cement.

Screws spun out of the walls, hurling themselves like missiles.

The chainsaw on the workbench roared to life.

Steve put his face to the window. “Please, honey, open the door.” The jack-in-the-box was hammering his foot; he kicked it away, but it started lurching back.

“Sweetpea?” he said.

“Yes, Dad?” She finally turned her head. Diane and Robbie were dodging salvos, knocking on the other windows.

Steve suddenly had a flash about the nature of Carol Anne’s reticence. “Sweetpea, that wasn’t Dad talking up in the bedroom. You know that, don’t you?”

“I know,” she said. At least, she thought it was something like that. Still, it was nice to hear him say it, in his own voice again.

“Good, then open the door quickly, Sweetpea.”

So she opened the doors, and everyone piled in as the garage debris really started to fly—nails, nuts and bolts, pipe joints, hurtling into the car, denting the metal.

Steve turned on the ignition. Cans of paint on the shelves began exploding, splattering over the windshield. The chainsaw on the workbench levitated and started floating toward them.

The car wouldn’t start. Battery low.

A pile of snow chains whipped over the front bumper.

“Come on!” shouted Diane, and Robbie began screaming.

Carol Anne buried her face in her mother’s chest.

The chainsaw started ripping through the hood.

Steve turned to see Robbie’s clown staring at him through the driver’s window. Suddenly it smashed its head against the glass, cracking the windshield from end to end.

The engine finally caught, turned over. Steve put it in reverse, slamming on the gas.

The car didn’t move.

The wheels were spinning, burning rubber, but the chains on the front bumper were wrapped around a supporting pillar. So nobody was going anywhere.

The chainsaw buzzed into the roof, narrowly missing Steve’s head.

Robbie screamed again and kept screaming.

Tires smoking. A rafter fell from the roof, crashing into the door. The chainsaw moved toward Diane and Carol Anne, and their screams joined Robbie's.

"Damn it!" Steve roared at the car, "Move!"

With a final burst of power, the car tore loose of its bound bumper and squealed backward through the garage door amid flying splinters of wood, glass, rakes, and hoes.

He screeched out of the driveway, sending the chainsaw spinning off into the garden.

And he peeled off down the street in a car full of cries and whimpers.

And the last thing he saw, looking back at his demolished garage, was the figure of Henry Kane.

Driving the anonymous midnight freeway, passing lights, passing darkness.

Carol Anne and E. Buzz dozed in the back seat beside Robbie, who slept deeply, gripping the baseball bat Taylor had made potent with magic designs and left for him here in the car.

Steve drove silently, unblinking, tense, chewing the inside of his lip, his knuckles white on the steering wheel.

Diane, now that they seemed to be out of immediate danger, felt a certain kind of calm resolve—resolving what, she didn't know; only that they couldn't go back to that house, they had to go on. Ahead, to the future, whatever it was.

And she knew she loved Steve. Whatever his faults and weaknesses had been over the past few years, he'd shown tonight what he was. Courageous, resourceful, vulnerable, supportive . . . and *with* them. Whatever happened, they would do this thing together.

She smiled at the multicolored streaks of paint on the edges of the window where the windshield wipers hadn't reached and put her head down on Steve's shoulder "Looks just like the day-glo you painted your van to impress Cookie Gurnich," she said sweetly. "You do this just to impress *me!*"

"Who else?" He smirked, his gloom breaking a little.

There was more silence, more comfortable now. Then she said, "You know where you're going?"

"Cuesta Verde," he answered, flinching only slightly. "Diane, we've got to attack this thing head-on."

She agreed intuitively but wanted to talk it out. “Steve . . . what about the kids?”

“Taylor told me that we’ve got to go back . . . together. All of us.” He looked less than certain but more than resigned. “You believe him?”

She didn’t know what to think. She knew what to feel, though. She felt Taylor was right.

She heard a rustling in the back. “Honey, you still up?”

“Yes, Mom,” said Carol Anne.

“Was real smart of you to hide in the car.”

“Oh, it wasn’t my idea,” said Carol Anne. “Taylor told me to.”

“Told you to get out of the house?”

“He said he was making Dad’s car a safe place to hide in but that it wouldn’t run very well.”

Steve half laughed. “Good thing we didn’t have to get it started in a hurry,” he muttered.

Robbie was awake now, yawning. “Are you angry at Taylor, Dad?”

“No, I’m not angry at him.” He was angry at *himself* for living in a coma the past four years.

Diane looked around at her little family—little knights on a little crusade. “Steven . . . I believe Taylor,” she said. “And I trust you.”

The car limped through the desert night—dented, painted, sawed, and torn—to the outskirts of Los Angeles, up around its northern perimeter, to the housing development once known as Cuesta Verde Estates.

The Freelings became intensely silent as they drove slowly through their old haunts. Curving avenues, once-manicured lawns.

CUESTA VERDE—WHERE DREAMS COME TRUE.

The houses were boarded; the dreams were dead.

All but one nightmare that refused to die.

Steve pulled the car to a stop in front of the lot on which their house had once stood. Just dusty clay now, surrounded by a high chain-link fence. Off to the side, a bulldozer slept its spiritless sleep.

They just sat inside the car, watching, for a long time. Painful memories resided here still, waiting to be roused.

The Freelings walked toward the excavation site. It was lit only by the moon, though sodium-vapor overhead arc lamps still stood, dark, ready to be disassembled tomorrow, when the site would be closed by

authorities. At the moment, these light poles looked like giant insects, standing with their glassy eyes until the right moment to pounce.

Steve, Diane, Carol Anne, and Robbie edged past the gate to the rim of the pit. The wind blew dust into their faces; the moon went behind a cloudbank. Darkness became substance.

Suddenly there was a loud *GCHNNKK!* and the arc lights flared on with blinding intensity, filling the excavation with an orange radiance, throwing the tunnels and landfalls into dark relief, casting ominous shadows from the piles of earth and rock.

Squinting, Steve could barely see the hunched-over figure that sidled up on his left.

“Looks kinda like hell, don’t it?” said Tangina, pointing her flashlight toward the shaft they were to descend.

CHAPTER 8

“Thank God it’s you,” breathed Diane, bending down to hug their diminutive champion.

“I knew you’d be here,” said Tangina, “so I had to be here, too.”

“We had to come,” Steve began to explain, but he didn’t know how.

“I know.” Tangina looked sad. “But there are many dangers you must consider, Steven.”

“We know that, Tangina,” said Diane. This was hard for her. If this didn’t work—and she had no plan of attack or any reason to believe it *would* work, other than sheer desperation—then they’d lose everything. “This is our last hope, Tangina. We’ve got to try to free ourselves.”

Tangina nodded. “Follow me,” she said.

She led them to the manhole that plunged to the caverns below and climbed down the ladder. The others followed.

Once they were below ground, the light of the brilliant arc lamps disappeared immediately, and it was dark as a tomb. Tangina kept her flashlight on the ladder until everyone had made it safely to the stone floor, then she turned off even that feeble glow.

“It was so bright up top,” she whispered, “I want to give your eyes a chance to get used to the dark.”

Their other senses were quickly heightened: the cool, musty smells; the damp walls; the deadened sounds of distant water dripping; the taste of fear.

After a minute she flipped the switch on again. The beam illuminated a series of cavernous pathways, twisting down into the bedrock. “Now listen to me carefully,” said Tangina. “Stay together, no matter what happens. The worlds of this life and the Other Side have met here before. If we are taken beyond this dimension, we have only one chance. We must separate the beast from his flock and show them where the Light is—some of them made it through to the Light the last time you were there, but many remain with him, herded by the fear of his terrible wrath.” She spoke with a special conviction that echoed of its own fears. “But be careful,” she went on, “and don’t go too far. For if *you* cross over into the Light, you won’t be able to return.”

Robbie crowded his father's side. "Dad . . . I'm scared."

Tangina, who was the same height as the boy, looked him in the eye with the comradeship of human frailty. "Me, too." She smiled.

"And so am I," added Steve, lest Robbie fall under the false notion that fear was the province of women and children. "But being brave is doing what you've got to do, despite how scared you might be. Understand?"

"Yeah, Dad," said Robbie. "I'll be brave."

"Good," whispered Steve, and hugged his son with the love of a man afraid he was about to be remembered fondly.

Diane took Carol Anne's shoulders in her hands. "Honey, if you don't want to do this, it's okay. We can leave here now."

"No, Mom—I want to." She wasn't sure why. It had to do with dreams and pasts, and like everyone else here, she knew it was just something she had to do.

"I love you very much," Diane whispered proudly, almost crying. "Don't ever forget that." She wiped away a tear then for the innocent bravery of children. "Okay, everybody—let's go."

And so they went. Deeper into the cavern, Tangina in the lead, Diane bringing up the rear.

Massive old support beams balanced the earth above them as they wound to the next lower level. Here and there disintegrating corpses, half-embedded, reached out at them, eternally imploring. Carol Anne clung to her mother, Robbie was wide-eyed and tried to walk the way he imagined a man was supposed to walk in such a situation.

Steve suddenly had a funny sensation, like prickles at the back of his neck. He looked left and saw, to his dense horror, a pictogram on the wall: the figure of a bending man, arms akimbo, a snake curling out of his mouth.

The image echoed nauseatingly through Steve's soul. He knew intimately the story being recorded here: here, how many centuries ago, a man had been invaded by the Beast and was spewing the thing out again. Just as Steve had done.

He shivered, steadied himself against the wall, labored his breathing for a few seconds. Diane came up to him, put her hands on his shoulders. "You okay?" she said.

He nodded but remained pale. He'd come so close, alone with his bottle, to total annihilation; and now, together, they'd come so far.

He shook off his chill and motioned that they should continue.

The path dipped down, became muddy—this area had been filled

with water a few days ago, pumped out by the excavation crew. Now it was a slippery depression. Tangina led the Freelings up its far side, where it opened on a large cave full of skeletons.

This was the chamber Taylor had found. Scores of mummified corpsers, groping up a rise toward the silted-over carcass of a single man, grinning back down on this congregation with a soul of pure evil.

Diane stared up at the laughing cadaver with a sickening coming-together of her memories, visions, dreams. Her breathing grew shallow; shudders took hold of her body.

Steve grabbed her. “Diane? You okay?”

Tangina ran up. “What is it? What’s the matter, Diane?”

“Diane, say something,” said Steve.

“Mom?” Carol Anne called weakly.

Diane took a step back—back away from the figure on the mound. “It’s horrible,” she whispered intensely.

“What is?” said Tangina.

“They’re all . . . they’re all dying here . . .” Diane murmured.

“How?” Tangina urged.

“They . . .” She suddenly saw it all—these skeletons became young, alive people to her inner vision, their faces pleading, their hands beseeching the man on the mound, Henry Kane. He was smiling at her now, just the way he’d smiled yesterday on her front porch.

She described her vision. “They . . . they lock themselves in this cavern because he tells them the end of the world is coming . . .”

Kane placed his hand on the face of the woman reaching up to him, tears of joy streaming from her eyes. “You’re not dying here!” said Kane. “You’re not!”

Diane stared into the depths of her trance. “But the day he predicted for the end comes and goes,” she said, as if it were happening right then. “And a new day begins . . .”

Kane raised his arms to the congregation. Candles flickered in the small cavern, his underground cathedral. “Follow me to a better place,” he enjoined them. “Don’t fear. Your little ones are surrendering to me. Look at them. They’ll be reborn into a better world with me! Follow their lead. This is a beautiful day. A joyous day. Come with me to God!”

Diane continued narrating softly: “But Kane won’t let them leave. He tells them the earth has been spoiled . . . and they believe him.” She began to weep. “They begin too suffocate. No air in here. Crying . . . begging for mercy . . .”

Children gasping for air. One by one, the votive candles flickered and died. The faithful slumped. Only Kane remained erect, charged by the power of his mastery over them.

"The children are falling!" cried Diane, and suddenly Carol Anne saw it, too: the anguish of the strangling spirits, confused children, sick for air.

"Mom, they need help!" Carol Anne shouted, trying to make her mother do something as those children of two centuries earlier had begged their parents to do something.

One by one, they dropped, tears streaking their faces, tongues lolling out the sides of their mouths—dropped to the cold earth. Some hugged their children; some tried to claw their way to freedom, too late. Kane stared on, triumphant.

Diane's voice was getting weaker, as if her own oxygen were being cut off. "Everyone . . . everywhere confused, hurt, lost beyond words . . . reaching out for help that never came . . ." She turned her head to stare directly at Kane with a loathing that penetrated the grave. "Because they worshipped *him,*" she muttered.

At that, the ground began to tremble. Diane's vision of Kane—and Carol Anne's vision—reached up his arm and pointed his terrible finger at Carol Anne.

But then it wasn't their vision anymore; they were back in the unsealed cavern, surrounded by skeletons, and it was the mummified body of Kane lifting its bony hand to point accusingly at them.

The trembling of the earth increased as a hurricane wind vented through the cave. All at once a blinding light burst behind Kane's corpse, sucking it into a vortex at its center. The wind roared like a wounded animal.

Tangina backed away in terror. This was it, the opening to the astral plane, the dimension that she'd tried for so long to avoid at all costs and that had then been denied her by her own blindness. "It's happening!" she yelled over the racket. "Maybe we should run . . ." Maybe Steve would make her leave. Maybe she wouldn't have to . . .

"No!" shouted Steve. "We've got to stay!"

"Steven?" Diane groped for him. She, too, was wavering.

He grabbed her hand tightly. "No!" he bellowed loud enough for Kane to hear on the other side.

The light grew brighter yet, flooding the cave, making the seekers avert their eyes.

"Diane?" Steve yelled, pulling her close.

She hugged him. "I'm with you!"

The light flared, unbearably bright, like the center of a magnesium flame . . . and then went out. The wind stopped; the earth stilled.

Tangina picked up her flashlight and turned it on. Before her stood Steve and Robbie.

Diane and Carol Anne were gone.

Steve turned in circles. “Oh, my God . . . where’s Diane? Where’s my baby?”

And then Carol Anne’s disembodied voice, so chillingly familiar in character that Steve knew in an instant where it was coming from: *“Dadddddy! Hellllllllllllp meeeeeeee!”*

It was coming from another dimension.

Steve began banging his fists against the stone walls, searching helplessly for the portal to the astral plane. But it was closed again. “Diane!” he shouted. “Carol Anne! Where are you?!”

“Come back to us!” screamed Robbie.

“Keep talking to them!” Tangina urged. “Don’t lose contact!” She felt heartsick. She could have entered the ether with them, but she didn’t, frozen with fear of what lay in wait for her.

Steve turned on her angrily. “What the hell do you mean!? We’ve *lost* contact! They’re gone!”

“Don’t argue!” she yelled back. “Just keep talking to them, before they drift too far!”

“Talk to us, Carol Anne,” Steve called. “Diane, do you hear me?”

From far, far away came his wife’s voice, filtered by the membrane that separated the two universes. *Hellllp meeee! Steven, pleassse! We’re lossssssst!”*

Steve shook Tangina. “There’s got to be a way over! We’ve got to go to them. Now! Help us, damn it!” He’d never trusted her completely, not even when Diane had; but now he didn’t trust her at all. For all he knew, she was an accomplice in this madness.

“I don’t know how, Steven,” she said, quaking. “I’m sorry . . . I don’t know.”

But then they heard another sound. A droning, rhythmic, atonal chanting that was at once eerie and familiar. It was Taylor’s voice.

“Taylor?” Steve whispered.

It was the sound of hope.

They followed the sound down two sloping tunnels that widened into another cave entrance. There they found Taylor stoking a small ritual fire, surrounding the blaze with a length of rope he’d laid on the ground.

As they rushed up to him he threw something into the firepit. Flames leaped high, licking the low ceiling of the cavern. He stared deeply into the fire and spoke without greeting: “I can see her. This is the way in”—he appeared to be entranced—“but I’m not sure it’s the way out.” His face was painted dark green—the color of the inner earth—with white lightning running from his eyes and down his cheeks, denoting the source of his power.

“Is she all right?” pressed Steve.

“We have work to do,” Taylor rumbled, ignoring the question. He continued glowering into the fire and began to chant.

After Taylor had left Steve at the truck he had walked many miles in the desert, looking for a sign. He turned north at two scorpions fighting, then east at a dry water-hole in the shape of a goat horn. He gathered up a handful of buffalo grass, which he stuffed in his shirt. And finally he came to what he was looking for, though he hadn’t known it until he had seen it.

Lying in the sparse shade of a tall cactus was the bleached skeleton of a burro. A cracked leather harness lay stuck in the sand, connected by a frayed rope to the rusted-through remains of a small iron ore wagon.

Taylor approached the scene delicately, almost reverently. He had no doubt he’d find the miner’s skeleton nearby, but he wasn’t interested in that, nor in the pouch of rich ore the miner possibly still clutched to his bones. Taylor was interested in the rope.

The connection. The thing that connected laborer to burden, animal to iron, wildness to civilization. The thread that wove two things into one, making a pattern, a harmony. The connector. The thing that binds.

Gently he untied the rope from the harness and the cart. It was so thin in parts that it shredded in his fingers. He coiled carefully what was left. He cut his thumb on the jagged metal of the hitch-up, but rather than close the wound, he let it bleed freely into the rope. When it finally clotted on its own, Taylor pressed it to the dust to seal it.

He cut a wedge out of the cactus with his knife and sucked the morsel for water.

Then he set off walking again.

By late afternoon he reached one of the mesas where the Anasazi had lived. Cliff dwellings built into the rock face, they’d been empty for many centuries, since that magic race of people had died. Taylor would draw on some of their magic.

He sat in the middle of the floor of a small room with good spirit and started a fire. By the light of the fire and the lowering sun, he skinned his rattlesnake, making a good meal of the meat.

Next he cut the skin into fine, long strips and spread them out on the floor beside the mat of sweat-soaked buffalo grass he'd carried in his shirt and the length of blood-stained desert rope.

Then he unraveled the rope.

And then he began to weave.

Weaving was a form of meditation to Taylor. A way to speak with his Kachinas, to see patterns, to prepare for great tests. He had been a rug weaver before he was a Snake Priest, before he was a warrior, even before he was Taylor. Weaving was his oldest Way, and it brought him the most harmony.

He wove the ribbons of snakeskin in intricately with the bloody rope fibers and the stringy, tough filaments of grass; the knowledge of the weaving was in his fingers, freeing his mind to travel over things past and future.

Henry Kane approached him with a splendiferous smile. "Ben Lagou!" he called. "Are you ready?"

"Born ready," he replied. Ben Lagou raised his concertina and began to play as Kane brought the bow down on his fiddle and Davey banged away on the little triangle.

"Ohhhh, Madeleine," they sang. And the congregation danced.

They were Cajun, many of them; but others belonged as well—Appalachians, Texicans. And former members of a variety of religions were there: Catholics, Baptists, voodooists, Jews.

But all were here to follow Kane. At the moment, to follow him in the reel he played on his fiddle; tomorrow, to follow him to the edge of the earth, if necessary. To seek utopia.

He'd promised no less.

And so they went. Kane in the lead, with Ben Lagou at his right hand, and a hundred Faithful close behind. Up through Texarkana, across the badlands, down into New Mexico.

The heat began to take its toll. And the Apache, of course. The year was 1837.

Some of the Faithful broke faith, straggled behind in Matamoros, Santa Fe, Muskrat City. Lagou never doubted, though; he saw the fire in Kane's eye.

Arizona, Nevada, down through Death Valley—the salt flats. Devils Postpile—and finally to California. Land of redemption.

They came to an area of rolling green hills. The Mexicans who lived nearby called it Cuesta Verde. A small river ran through one of the ravines beside a series of caves; it was here that Kane announced the long-awaited utopia, so it was here his party rested.

All might have been well but for the discovery that one of the caves was already occupied by a small, non-hostile clan of Indians—hunter-gatherers who used the shelter during the winter months. They were perfectly willing to share the accommodations with Kane's group. Kane, unfortunately, was having none of that; these savages were not believers.

"Henry," Lagou said, "let them stay. They are peaceful people."

"They are barbarians," said Kane, "and will but fog the spirits of our brethern. They must go, for this is our utopia."

So Kane armed himself and a dozen of his men and ran the Indians out of their cave shelters, at some cost to life.

That was when Lagou first noticed the change in Kane's eyes.

He said nothing, but he watched. Winter turned to spring. Crops were planted, trees felled to build small homes. There was a drought. A few more followers left, to head further west on their own.

Kane began holding seances.

Lagou protested.

"The Lord works in strange ways," said Kane, "His wonders to perform."

Kane began demanding that the women visit him at night or he would send a flood.

The Faithful hesitated, and there was a flood.

"My wrath is swift," he scolded.

They sent their women to him.

Then he demanded that their children visit him at night, or he would send fire.

The women protested, and a brushfire swept through the valley, destroying crops and houses.

They sent him their children.

Lagou denounced him. They fought, and Lagou beat him senseless.

But that night, to ease his own bruises, Lagou bought a bottle of tequila from a traveling drummer. And at the bottom of the bottle was a worm . . .

Ben Lagou transformed that night before the eyes of the company. In the light of a roaring bonfire he became a winged serpent that first mutilated and then ate one of the dogs. Then he changed into a powerful man with the head of an elk, with antlers that grew before their eyes, twisting and entwining anyone in their path, wrapping around people's throats,

suffocating them . . .

And then the elk-man doubled over, writhing in pain, and changed back into Ben Lagou, gagging and shaking . . . and suddenly he was vomiting this snake-thing, this serpent, this gelatinous creature like an aborted calf . . .

And it slithered off into the caves.

The next day Kane called them all into his cave and sealed it off, that they might all follow him Beyond. He proved to them that he had been right, that Lagou was the evil one; hadn't they seen Lagou work his devil ways the night before, shifting shapes in the firelight?

They believed Kane.

And as the air in the sealed-off cave was gradually used up they all died.

Only Ben Lagou survived, sleeping outside where no one would go near him.

He wandered off, keeping his dark secret with him.

But the Indians had seen. They'd continued living invisibly in the surrounding hills, and they'd witnessed everything that happened. They moved back into the caves that winter and drew the story on the cave walls—the story of the man with the elk's head, the man who spewed the serpent from his mouth.

Lagou died, but his spirit later filled the person of Wilson Jones; and when he died, Sleeping Bear of the Comanche; and when he died, Moonshadow Kelly. And each of them spent his life in pursuit of an evil presence never found, because the spirit of Henry Kane slept, sealed, undisturbed . . .

Until the spirit of Ben Lagou filled the man known as Taylor, and the crypt of Kane was jostled by the excavations of Cuesta Verde Estates, and Kane's taste for little girls was aroused by the innocent Carol Anne.

And all these crossings of the threads of so many lives had finally come together into the knot that ended the weave, fixing the pattern eternally . . . even as Taylor's own fingers were knotting the end of the sorcerer's rope he'd woven into a magical design.

Taylor pulled on the rope. The weaving was finished. Strong. Ready.

"Hey, man, you *live* here, or you just paid by the Department of the Interior to hang out and look authentic?" This was followed by mixed laughter, some embarrassed, some stoned.

Taylor looked up. Four heavy-metal punks, two male and two female, were standing in the door: torn Ozzie Ozboume T-shirts, single earrings, silver-studded black leather, hatcheted hair. Not a local tribe.

There was a van parked outside. "I could use a lift," said Taylor.

The comedian of the clan offered his hash pipe, and they all broke up laughing.

"Which way are you headed?" Taylor pressed. The sun was down already, and he knew tonight was the night.

"Nonstop to L.A., Chief. You on the bus or off?"

He was on. They wove through traffic at record speed when he told them that he had, that night, a rendezvous with the devil incarnate. In fact, they dropped him off at Cuesta Verde, in return for Taylor's rendition of the Chant of the Dead into their portable tape recorder.

Strange and wondrous, how these threads mesh, he thought. He thanked them and went down into the caves.

There he set up his ritual fire, painted his face, placed his rope, began his incantations. And there, in the fire, he saw Carol Anne, lost, scared. Stalked by the Evil One.

He took his spear from the niche in which he'd secreted it—the spear Sings-With-Eagles had given him. To its already magical point he affixed the fragment of obsidian lance tip he kept in his medicine bag—the lance tip he'd already used to puncture Kane's newt-filled heart when last he'd confronted the demon in the astral; the chip originally from the lance carried by the first Indian Kane had murdered, back in 1840 in the hills of Cuesta Verde.

Taylor laid the reinforced spear behind him and increased the pressure of his chanting.

He didn't know how long he'd been there when Steve, Robbie, and Tangina came running up. "I can see her," he said. "This is the way in, but I'm not sure it's the way out."

"Is she all right?" asked Steve. He sounded desperate.

"We have work to do," Taylor rumbled, ignoring the question. He continued glowering into the fire and resumed his chant.

Carol Anne's voice floated through the ether once more. *"Daddddy! Hellllllp! He's here! Mommmmmy!"*

And Diane's voice: *"Please! Noooooo!"*

Steve begged Taylor. "Please," he whispered.

Taylor stopped chanting. "The entity is with them. They are in grave danger."

Steve punched the wall, tearing his skin. Robbie wrung his hands around his useless baseball bat.

Taylor continued. "Hold on to each other. When you find them, band together—that will prevent you from crossing over into

eternity." He stared at them meaningfully. "I'll try to bring you all back."

"Taylor . . .?" Steve started to ask, but he could not bring himself to finish the question.

"Joined together," Taylor went on, "your family's light can defeat him. This is the battle you've been moving toward all your life." He motioned at the magical fire. "The entrance is through those flames."

Steve and Robbie stared into the blaze, steeled to throw themselves in, when suddenly, from the smoke and flames, emerged a ghost image, congealing into the figure of the Beast.

It wailed, scraping the ceiling, its body a mass of writhing, screaming heads and faces, the tortured mass of souls that comprised it.

And one of the faces was Carol Anne's.

Steve faltered in horror, Robbie gasped.

Taylor shouted, "This is an illusion! The Beast lies! Go into the flames now! *Now*!!"

Steve hesitated, staring at the thing. It had writhing tentacles growing from its brain, and the faces that emerged from its rotting torso twisted and winced as the creature whipped at itself.

Kane's own malignant head sat atop the others. He looked down from the arch of the cavern and spoke to the group of mortals huddled there; his voice was high no longer, but the timbre of the grave: "Cross over here at your own peril, then, and at the peril of this child I claim as mine . . . for if you cross over into my domain, I will surely kill her and spare no pain."

There was no more time to doubt or contrive. There was only now, and only here. And only each other.

Steve embraced Robbie, fused himself to his love for Diane and Carol Anne, spurned the horror of the image before him . . . and, with his boy, jumped into the blaze.

There was a wild splash of fire . . . and they were gone.

Only Taylor and Tangina remained in the cave, sitting anxiously before the now dwindling flames.

Steve and Robbie found themselves floating without direction in a spaceless land of vapors, light, and shadow. Since there were no spatial dimensions as such, there was no motion—only vague changes in orientation, perceptible through alterations in the ether wind and affected by thought—affected somehow, but Steve could not

determine quite how.

He tried to sail *this* way, but seemed to go *that* way. Clouds engulfed him, yet the clarity of his vision increased. He could see the back of his head; he couldn't find his legs.

It was all he could do just to hold on to Robbie. In fact, they gripped each other with a fierceness that projected its own aura in this place, which had its own natural laws.

It was sometime later—though how much was hard to tell, since there was no time there, either—that they saw Diane and Carol Anne, clutching each other, floating amid dozens of vaporous shapes that Steve realized were spirits, just as he realized he'd been seeing them all over and regarding them as wisps of cloud.

Carol Anne saw him at the same moment. "Dadddddy!!" she cried with a strange, muffled echo.

He willed himself toward his child—he hadn't a clue how he did it, except he focused all his being on that spot, and he was there . . . but upside down and backward with respect to Diane. So there was a lot of frantic grasping and twisting and trying and trying not to try, until finally they were all holding some part of one another and wrestling themselves together and wrapping arms around shoulders and waist, all in a bunch.

Except Carol Anne was just hanging on to Steve's wrist, a little apart from the rest.

"What's happening?" whispered Tangina.

The fire had rapidly burned down to coals, smoldering red in the blackness of the cave.

Taylor stared ferociously into the embers. "They've found one another," he said.

Her heart jumped. There was still hope of its working out, then. "Oh, God, can you bring them back? Taylor?" Then another skipped beat, and it was: "Taylor—what's the matter?"

Taylor saw something in the glowing charcoals that worried him, so he didn't spend any energy answering her. Instead he tightened the sorcerer's rope snugly around the firepit, tight enough nearly to singe it, and then he began to chant.

Steve felt a tugging at his waist and realized Taylor's rope was somehow in place there, binding him to Robbie. He loosened it enough to loop it over Diane's head and shoulders, so it was now fast

around the three of them; but as he tried to draw Carol Anne in closer to encompass her, too, a shadow passed over them all. Steve looked up.

It was the shadow of the Beast.

The thing was enormous, far bigger than all of them. The face that looked as if it had once been Kane's face was deformed by sores that bubbled, jaws that could not close. Its body, too, was horribly defiled, erupting with the faces of the souls it had eaten. And it was still hungry.

It moved toward them as they struggled to hold together, unable yet to tie Carol Anne onto their tether. It moved toward them with its mouth opening wider and wider, growing blacker and blacker in its greed to engulf them all.

For a moment they froze in shock at the sheer image of it. But Robbie realized he was still gripping his baseball bat inscribed with Taylor's protective symbols—and he threw it with all his might into the creature's reeking teeth.

The bat broke half a dozen of the Beast's fangs and lodged upright in its mouth, preventing its jaws from closing.

It gagged and shrieked, its broken teeth bleeding and spurting some foul ooze, and it thrashed in pain so wildly that the Freelings were thrown far away, to a different part of the universe.

It was still full of mists there, but in the distance they could see the Light.

"Don't look," instructed Diane. She forced calm on herself, but she was afraid. "I've seen it before. If we go in there . . . we don't go home again."

But that wasn't their immediate concern. Their immediate concern was the Beast, now hovering above them nearly blind with vengeance, its torn gums leaking venom. The baseball bat was gone.

The thing parted its jaws wide enough to take them all in and grabbed Carol Anne by the neck in a claw-hand at the end of one of its tentacles—grabbed her, wringing her from her father's grip.

"I told you I would kill her," laughed the beast. His claw squeezed tightly around the little girl's neck.

Her face first paled, then quickly began to rot. Her body went limp as he brought it up to his gaping mouth.

Taylor saw the girl in the fiend's grip and knew he could wait no longer. Slowly, meticulously, he pushed the point of the spear into the fire; then he altered its direction sightly and plunged the shaft of the

weapon deeply through the parallel dimension.

"What is it?" said Tangina. She saw the sweat beading on his forehead; she felt her heart go cold.

Taylor didn't speak, though. He thrust the spear into the fire, following even with his own hand, up to the wrist, burning his skin before withdrawing. Leaving the spear beyond.

Steve reached desperately out to his daughter, who was disintegrating in the grip of the Beast. He nearly turned away, the sight was so painful, so horrid . . . but he kept looking, kept stretching—

And the spear appeared. Hanging in the ether, just beyond his hand. A spear for him to use; it could be nothing else. A spear for a warrior.

It glowed as he brought his hand near it; glowed brightly when he stretched further than he'd thought possible and grabbed it.

Kane was too engrossed in his imminent feast to notice what was happening, but neither did Steve give him much time. In a single motion he leveled the spear and harpooned the Beast in the neck.

Green electrical discharges crackled from the point of contact, mingling with the deathless creature's own gurgled wails . . . leading suddenly to a tremendous explosion.

The force of the blast was so great, it tore Carol Anne from the thing's flailing tentacles and propelled her into the ether. Toward the Light.

And the other spirits, *within* the Beast, were likewise torn from it—freed at last to migrate to the Light from which they'd been so long withheld.

And the Beast—spear in throat, annihilated by Taylor's wizardry—was blown away by the power that ripped from his core all the souls he'd imbibed over the years, and the fiend was expelled, howling, into a black void from which there was no known return.

In the cave, the fire exploded in white light, knocking Taylor and Tangina against the wall. As they picked themselves up a howling wail rose from the flames, sending a black chill through their spirits.

"The beast is expelled," said Taylor. "His flock is free to pass over."

"They're moving to the Light?" Tangina asked.

But Taylor was again preoccupied, entranced, chanting the Way of Return.

All the freed spirits were floating toward the Light—some passing directly into it; some spinning into orbit around it a few times and then flowing into it, merging with it as their orbit degenerated; some dancing about in a fierce ecstasy of approach and then plunging through with a gush of light; some gloating, slow and stately; others nearing the Light ceremoniously, gingerly, humbly.

And in the midst of these passing spirits was Carol Anne—turning end over end, disoriented in the concussion caused by the Beast's destruction, drifting slowly closer to the potent radiance beyond.

Steve, Diane, and Robbie watched her go, unable to move themselves, able only to wish and to weep.

They watched her get caught up in a cluster of spirits, all moving along a shaft of light that emanated from the greater luminosity, which glowed brighter all the time, brighter with every soul that entered.

They watched this crossing over with awe, with a wonder that silenced them; and then with a great sadness as they saw Carol Anne pass over, through the Light, into the Light, beyond the Light, to the other side.

Tangina felt it, like a constriction in her chest, like a terrible and irremediable loss.

She stared into the fire. "Taylor," she whispered. "Bring her back."

Taylor only continued chanting, shaping the smoke with his hands.

"Taylor!" she repeated loudly. "Carol Anne is in great danger! Bring her back!"

His chant grew louder.

"Taylor!" she cried, near tears, "please bring her back! She is near lost!" Or maybe it was already too late.

He merely shook his head. The moment was not right. The pattern was not harmonious. He could lose them all if he was not careful, if he tried to rush the ordered progression. A weaver could not pull the final warp without the proper thread.

Tangina sobbed. "Oh, please, please . . ." But the tears filled her words, and she let go, finally, of all hope. "She's gone."

This was her worst fear realized. This innocent little girl, who'd believed in her and depended on her—gone. Tangina could neither help nor control nor sacrifice nor salvage. She could only witness and feel.

And the girl was gone.

* * *

Diane tried to move forward, to throw herself into the Light, but she could make no headway. “Oh, my God, my God,” she whispered.

They were all in shock.

“Come back, Carol Anne!” Robbie called; but no one came back.

In fact, all the spirits were gone—passed beyond.

And the Light itself was beginning to fade.

Steve, Diane, and Robbie were alone. Tears streamed down their cheeks as they hugged one another, burying their faces in one another, lost in grief, shrouded by twilight.

“My baby’s gone,” wept Diane. “She’s gone.”

But then another spark appeared, like a distant, burning star. It grew rapidly brighter, a benevolent coruscation blasting away the darkness . . .

And at its center, two figures appeared.

They moved toward the family, wafting down on the heavenly glow, closer and closer until it was quite apparent that one of the figures was Carol Anne.

Diane gasped. “Baby . . .”

They held hands, these two spirit forms; and then at some point the one released Carol Anne’s hand, and the child drifted purposefully into Steve’s and Diane’s outstretched arms.

They hugged, all of them, tenderly and mightily.

And then Carol Anne pointed back out at the other figure, the spirit who’d guided and released her. “Look, Mom!” she said.

And the others could see—it was Gramma Jess floating before them, smiling with the peace that surpasses understanding.

“I must go now,” said Jess. “I love you all.”

At which she receded into the light and was no more.

“It’s time,” said Taylor. Tangina watched him intently as he pulled the rope delicately through the fire.

Above them, the air began to take on a dull red glow, seeming to draw its energy from the surrounding dark.

The rope burst into flame in Taylor’s hands; he pulled tighter, ensnaring the flames, meeting resistance, setting the strength of his weight and spirit against the winds of the ether.

The glowing red spot grew brighter; it contained the figures of four

people, darkly outlined, insubstantial . . . and then the red scintillated, and the family burst forth in a rush, tumbling to the muddy cave floor beside the fire, where they looked up to see Taylor and Tangina staring at them.

"Thank God! It's a miracle!" Tangina's lips trembled.

Taylor clapped Steve on the back. "Some battle, huh?"

"Yeah," said Steve, still too stunned to comprehend.

It was over.

And in another dimension that surrounded their own, there were mists; there was shadow; there was a Light that sometimes grew bright but now was quiet; there was the soft clay of dreams.

But there were no spirits weeping or waiting. For all therein had passed to another place.

* * *

They climbed from the caverns at daybreak and walked past the fenced-in area to the street, to fresh air, to life without fear, to the growing up of children.

Tangina hugged them all good-bye, though they protested her going. She'd faced her fear, though, and accepted it about herself; things of the spirit were beyond her power to control. So be it, and so it was. She owned that knowledge of who she was, owned her self. She could go on with her life. And she would.

And she did.

She walked off into the wilderness of the ghost town and beyond. To find the rest of her life.

A noble goal for all of them.

As they approached the half-demolished station wagon Taylor touched Steve's shoulder. "Uh . . . your car . . ."

Steve smiled. "It's happy?"

"Not yet." Taylor frowned.

"How're we gonna make it happy?" Steve asked. He wanted everyone and everything to be as happy as he was. He was in control of his life once more.

Taylor paused, uncertain how best to tell him. "It wants to go home with me," he said.

"You asked it?"

"Yes." Taylor left no room for doubt.

"It's sure?" Steve pressed. If there was ever a car that could have an identity crisis, this was certainly the one.

Taylor nodded his certainty.

Well, I came into the world with nothing, thought Steve. "Okay, take it," he said, handing Taylor the keys.

Taylor nodded acceptance, got in the car, and drove slowly toward the main road.

Diane tapped Steve on the arm. "Steven—we need a ride home."

"Hey, Taylor," Steve called out.

Diane hung back a few steps, just to look at her family.

The kids were whispering excited stories to each other.

Steve was trotting after the car with more vigor than she'd seen in years.

The dawn was blossoming warmly into day.

About the Author

JAMES KAHN is a physician specializing in Emergency Room medicine in a Los Angeles hospital. He has written two science fiction novels for Del Rey books—WORLD ENOUGH AND TIME and TIME'S DARK LAUGHTER—as well as the novelizations of POLTERGEIST, RETURN OF THE JEDI, and INDIANA JONES AND THE TEMPLE OF DOOM.